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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Division of English

Writing Program

The Birthday Boy and Other Boys: Stories

by

Charles Ramsay McCrory

A thesis presented to
The Graduate School
of Washington University in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree
of Master in Fine Arts

May 2019

St. Louis, Missouri

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This thesis is dedicated to the indelible memory of my mother, Deirdre McCrory Henry. Your boy did it! I hope I've done you proud.

Charles Ramsay McCrory

Washington University in St. Louis

May 2019

The Heir

His mother was a famous actress; his father was a matter of public imagination. Compiling the guesses of the gossip columns and his mother's three licensed biographers, his father was either a French actor iconic for his cleft chin; a male starlet briefly iconic for the hard V of his hips in swimsuits, with whom his mother had starred in a summer beach slasher; an avant-garde guitarist whom some journalists credited with inventing noise rock; or—least compelling, and most likely—her longtime manager. Two of the five were now dead, or close. The rocker had nodded off and fallen into the Amstel in the early morning after a drug-befogged threesome with the actress and a celebrated designer. This rendered him, in terms of sheer frequency of sex, the unlikeliest contender for paternity and thus the most cherished by believers in miracle and tragedy.

The designer never came under suspicion. “She is the only woman who has ever excited me,” he told *Vanity Fair* on the occasion of the son's eighteenth birthday. “But I have never touched her, that night or any other, except with my garments.” He remained the actress' lifelong friend, dressing her for all her public appearances. He served as her son's godfather, a role he was said to take quite gravely. The *Vanity Fair* interview was accompanied by a two-page family photo arranged around a grand piano. The boy, in a tux torn open to the chest, leans over the bench into the exposed keys, as if spent from his own celebrations. His mother sits beside him in a nightgown patterned with irises, silhouetted in the light from a Tiffany lamp, a hand on his knee. The designer is the only one who stands, in the shadows from the lamp, arms crossed and smirking.

The actress knew the tactics available to her. She could claim a father and stick to him, which would be hopelessly dull. She could keep a sphinx's silence on the matter, thus chilling speculation with her own smugness. She could feign a diva's sensitivity, requesting in interviews that the question be forbidden, charging from the room if her order were disobeyed. Or she could parry. When the boy was three months old, she invited a clutch of reporters to her Chelsea apartment, on the condition that they treat it as a shower and bring a gift for the baby. She held court from the sofa, within the folds of a tunic the designer had made for her, a pale, diaphanous blue silk with a white sash to hold the baby to her chest.

"He was born of a virgin!" she told her first interrogator. Her smile floated calmly on the swell of laughter in the room. "No, really, I'll call her, and she can come and tell you all about it."

The starlet was now running for U.S. Senate in Missouri; the actor had just been put on life support in Provence. As her son grew to favor the actor, down to the split chin, the nose shaped like a playing-card spade, the forehead lined, even at twelve, like a sheet of music, many in the press began referring to the boy's paternity as an open secret. Some mention of this was expected in the actor's obituaries.

The boy knew it upset his mother to think of the actor. They had both lived in Paris when he was born, and her behavior at the time gave the most damning record against her public flippancy over the question of his father. She gave a late-night TV interview on the occasion of the actor's impending death. "I'd gotten into some trouble with diet pills," she explained, "trying to burn off the baby weight so I could work again. I lost the weight, but then I lost more and more. And I was crashing harder each time. These horrible depressions you wouldn't believe."

“You had become an addict,” the interviewer supplied.

“I’ll never forget how I felt,” she continued. “So small—smaller than the baby, too small even to hold him.”

“In a way, you could say you were.”

She held her hands outside herself, to cradle the invisible giant-baby her son had been.

“He was the only soul I knew in Paris,” she said, meaning the actor. “I was desperate. I needed someone to take the baby while I went back to New York to admit myself for treatment. ‘Take him!’ I begged, ‘take him, he’s yours too!’”

“And is he?”

She paused, slumped forward on the studio couch, jarred from her possession by her old self. “I don’t know,” she said. “But he was the only soul I knew in Paris.”

The actor refused to take the child, which left her no choice. One of the actor’s biographies claims that, knowing the date of her flight to New York and what she would do, he woke up that morning and went straight to the fire escape in his pajamas, completely unruffled by the sight of the swaddled infant lying there. By all accounts he’d made a hapless but not malicious guardian of three months, feeding the baby condensed milk, carting him along to the Marseilles set of the film he was shooting. During takes the baby slept beside the director’s chair in a wine box padded by crew members’ coats.

The boy possessed no feeling one way or another about these events. It seemed ludicrous, the height of self-indulgence, to harbor a grudge about things that happened to you before you could form memories. Like so much of his and his mother’s lives, this story seemed to be about

other people. (Not that anyone ever bothered to interview *him* about his non-feelings.) He knew his mother would fly to Provence and pull the actor's plug herself if it would untether her from their association. But this would never happen, no matter how long he stayed dead. She always said that the only part of your life people ever wanted to know about was the part where you'd only been playing at living. This was not immortality. It was infantilizing. It was like being questioned about your sandbox companions long after you'd all grown up and lost touch and at least one of you, statistically, had died an untimely death.

Naturally, he tried his hand at acting. But he'd grown up too close to movies and the people who made them to speak their language straight. He did a screen test for a part in a mob film. When his mother found out he hadn't even been offered a callback, she contacted the studio and obtained a copy of the test for them to watch together at the Chelsea apartment.

The scene required him to smoke. Not only had he refused the fake cigarette offered by the PA and lit the real one he'd brought with him, he'd also improvised a tic of squinting as he plucked flecks of tobacco off the tip of his tongue. His mother recognized this as a gesture of her manager, who'd hung around parties at the apartment when her son was a boy, always getting instantly drunk and enacting inappropriate pantomimes with her son—joggling him on his knee, lifting him and swinging him headfirst toward open windows. When the actress playing her son's *gumar* moved to knead her temples with the tips of her fingers—that was his mother's gesture, with which she'd been proud to infect a generation of ingénues—he blew an unscripted jet of smoke into her eyes.

When it was finished, she looked at her son's face in the light from the screen. All his possible fathers' features seemed to pile there, one on top of another, like a club sandwich.

Perhaps he couldn't act, but he was still violently handsome, in a way that reminded people, vaguely, of a bygone era. He photographed well on a sailboat, in a striped shirt open to the sternum, wincing dully into the sun. In an ad for his godfather's fashion house he was shot from the side, bent at the waist over a marble countertop to stare out at SoHo through tall windows. He wore a white, ribbed turtleneck sweater, a gold watch, and nothing else. His mother went blind over the photos. At dinners with friends she seemed to hover, tensed, centimeters above her seat, until someone's mention of the spread dropped her back to earth.

"My own flesh and blood! His...his...*haunches* splayed across every newsstand in the world. I'm so mortified I could die!" *Of love*, the boy added to himself.

His godfather was not so enchanted. He invited the boy to lunch at the Plaza Hotel.

"You're gorgeous, you don't need me to tell you. God washed his hands in the sea with Ivory soap and you were what floated up. And this is the age when stars are reborn as their children, more beautiful than themselves, and not as actors or musicians, but as models, beautiful and mute."

The boy swirled a shred of prosciutto in its hollandaise puddle. His godfather only ever spoiled him alone when he wanted to tell him something too delicate for his mother to hear.

"I don't want to break it to your lady mother, but this resurrection only ever works with male stars and their sons. People still know your mother, but you don't look like her. You don't even have her last name."

"But what about—?" The boy mentioned a singer he knew, the daughter of an actress with a different last name.

“It’s not the same for women.”

He mentioned the actor son of a famous heiress with a different last name.

“Again, different. They’re a dynasty.”

“We’re a dynasty.”

His godfather hiccupped into his Campari. “Your grandfather owned a chain of supermarkets. You’re third-generation new money.”

His godfather favored him with one more magazine spread, for which he had to soak in a bathtub in a full suit. This was in February; they shot in a cold-water apartment. The shoot took so long the boy caught pneumonia, and the photos disappointed. Everyone could see he’d lost the bored disdain that had poisoned his acting and exalted his modeling.

“He looks rigid,” his godfather tutted to his mother, poring over the shots in the Chelsea apartment while the boy convalesced in the bedroom. “We wanted Ophelia, we got Hypothermia.”

“I see,” she said. “Thank you anyway. You gave him a chance.”

The boy gave himself over to the agony of a child hearing himself discussed by grownups in the next room. Beneath this, sinking into his aching limbs, was the knowledge that he had been tricked. His godfather wanted his mother all to himself, but he couldn’t let her suspect he’d cut her son loose by choice. Now that he’d stiffened up under the camera, the fault was his own; his mother would never know his godfather had gotten inside his head. Having learned this, the boy was still too young, and too delirious with illness, to engage in intrigue. When his godfather

had gone, he simply slumped across his mother's sofa in his clammy pajamas and told her everything.

"I'm sorry nepotism hasn't worked for you exactly as you'd like," she said when he'd finished. "Do you have any idea how difficult it was for me? My father could have done anything—could have driven a golf cart on a studio lot—and still all I'd hear for the rest of my life would be how I'd had everything handed to me. But you—you *have* had everything. I've given you all the ingredients for a personality, just not the work ethic to stir them together. That's hardly *his* fault. Now get some rest. I've decided to do some stage work here in New York. You and I are going to be Hamlet and Gertrude for the spring season. Don't worry, darling, it's Shakespeare. No one will be able to tell you aren't any good."

Because she said all this without a flicker of anger, the job of kicking him out of the apartment fell to himself. Sweating out his fever into the leather jacket he'd thrown over his pajamas, he prowled up 6th Avenue in the cold. Fucking was the only thing that soothed him at a time like this, and his lust flowed and mixed with his other troubles; so when he emptied out at Times Square, it seemed the fertile delta of all his hopes and desires. A lady in a white fox stalked among the heat ripples. Leather-clad legs ran up into the window of a stalled station wagon as an unseen upper half directed the driver toward an arrangement. The porn theaters smiled from the jaundiced mouths of their marquees, their curtains stirring to release whiffs of furtive semen.

He staggered into a matinee of *The Little Death in Venice*. The theater was so sparsely peopled that he immediately spotted his godfather's erect profile in the third row. Sighing mightily, he plopped down next to him. For a while neither said a word as each stared forward at

the screen. Two men kissed naked before a trompe l'oeil painting of a window opening onto a canal. One was brunette, the other so blonde it looked like a wig. The blonde began to kiss his way down the clefts of the brunette's body. Their untanned loins gleamed as if these were the zones that had been radiated with rays and bulbs.

"Would you like something to clean up with?" said his godfather.

"No thanks. I wouldn't want to ruin one of your silk scarves."

His godfather's bent arm swiveled like that of a doll, causing no visible motion in the rest of his body. "You could do this, you know," he said. "Not this trash, I mean. But there are still people who are interested in making it art."

The boy couldn't tell if he'd had this thought already or if his godfather had implanted it, and for this he hated him all the more. They finished the film in respectful silence, the only sound the chafe of fabric, curt and functional like ironing. At the denouement the older man pitched forward with a sound like a muffled sneeze, took several yogic mouth-breaths, and straightened back up. He then rubbed his hands with something that smelled of citrus, placed a business card on his armrest, and excused himself.

The address on the card led to a warehouse in the Meatpacking District. He had never subjected himself to a cattle call; he couldn't remember the last time he'd stood in line for anything. The warehouse smelled rural and metallic, like blood sprinkled with sawdust. Everyone took a paper slip with a number on it. The boy ahead of him, a mustachioed redhead in white overalls, kept muttering the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, in the original Middle English, with hand flourishes. They were skimmed off one at a time by a clipboard-wielding guy in yellowed gym clothes.

By the time the boy reached the front of the line, his pajamas were stuck to him like bandages. The guy with the clipboard escorted him to a back office, where a director sat behind a desk. He was a stringy man of about fifty, dressed in a calculatedly youthful combination of jeans, band t-shirt, and hooded sweatshirt. His face betrayed him: his mouth looked like a parched worm trying to suck its own tail.

“Strip,” the man said lazily.

The pajamas left creases in his flesh as he peeled them off. He planted his feet hip-width apart, stood front, back, and profile. When he stood in quarter-profile with his arms out at his sides, the director unfolded himself from his desk and came over to squint at him from various angles, hunching forward from the knees.

“Do I squat and cough?” the boy asked, some of his old arrogance returning.

The director snorted. “Save it for the doctor’s-office scenes. Now go on and sit in that chair facing me and jerk yourself off.”

The cold, warped metal of the folding chair stung his ass. His fever lent a dreamy edge to his performance; his cum felt hotter than usual, scalding his stomach.

“You know who you look just like?” the director said, pulling a towel out of a desk drawer and flinging it at him. He said the name of the starlet who was running for Senate. When the boy stopped scraping himself with the towel and looked at him in dismay, the director waved a hand.

“Before your time,” he said. “What’s say you get your dander back up while you sign a few things for us, and we’ll put you in a scene right away.”

The studio christened the boy after the starlet, with one letter changed to alter the spelling but not the pronunciation. He made five films that spring between *Hamlet* rehearsals with his mother.

“I’ve never seen you so relaxed,” chirped the play’s director. So relaxed that he didn’t mind the boy’s showing up to rehearsal up to two hours late, flushed and wavy-limbed. His mother did mind.

“He seems to think whatever you’re up to is responsible for your sudden naturalness onstage and I shouldn’t interfere,” she said, pulling him aside one afternoon. “But darling, we have to be professionals about this. Otherwise it doesn’t last. What are you up to? You can tell me.”

He stifled a smile as he considered telling his mother this was the second prince he’d be playing today, the first being a young Alexander the Great entertaining a roomful of oiled-up courtiers.

“You old professional,” he said, chucking his mother on the chin. From her expression, he might as well have socked her. “Rest easy. What I’m up to, you haven’t had to worry about for quite some time.”

He could never afterwards be sure whether it had been his godfather or some anonymous journalist crouched in the dark of a Times Square theater who revealed him as the star of *Bare All in the Park*, *Original Skin*, and *Parallel Loins*. Whatever the case, *Hamlet* packed out its opening night, and the crowds were not for his mother. Removing his makeup after curtain, he watched in the mirror as the director clawed his way through a gauntlet of bouquets to enter the

dressing room. He arranged himself tall in his seat for the castigation to follow. But the director was beatific.

“Tomorrow night you’re going to do the graveyard scene nude. And when you say, ‘He hath borne me on his back,’ for God’s sake pause for the wolf whistles.”

The actor flat-lined in Provence. The starlet won his primary by a landslide. In a daytime TV interview, he expressed pity for his pornographic namesake and condemned the entire film industry, highbrow and low, which he thanked God to have left long ago.

The boy was a star, and still people only wanted to talk to his mother.

“My son is his own person with his own destiny,” she told the *Times*. “That cannot help but make me proud.” As the boy read the interview, his mother’s face kept surfacing from behind the print, ashen and glaring from the wings on the night he performed his first nude graveyard scene. The director had not informed her of the change. She caught him by the wrist as he strutted naked toward his dressing room.

“You really despise me, don’t you?” she said. “I see it now. You despise my whole profession.”

He snatched his hand back. “They love me out there! Isn’t that what you wanted? So what’s the problem? I’m overshadowing you; is that it?”

“Bulls overshadow china. That’s hardly an achievement,” she said. “But I guess the blame falls with the one who let the bull in.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I know my way out of the shop.”

He continued to make films through the fall and winter, enough to move out of the Chelsea apartment and into his own walk-up in Queens. That Christmas his mother married his godfather in a small civil ceremony. Her son was not in attendance.

Kids

“You loved it,” Cody says, though half the time I don’t. Still, it turns me on to have him tell me.

“I’m bleeding,” I say through the cracked bathroom door. This seems a safe answer—it’s true, for one. But the way he plants his palm against the doorframe, leans on it with head bowed, like the beleaguered dad in a mid-century play, tells me what I was up to in saying it.

“Can’t win for losing,” he says, and slumps to the kitchen. I clean up and follow.

Lunch, these days, is frozen chicken sandwiches. Cody folds the patties in damp paper towels before sticking them in the microwave. This, he explains, will keep them moist. The buns he separates from the patties and crisps in the toaster oven. I have never met someone so inventive with the instructions for frozen food.

“I’m gonna take good care of you,” he says, spreading mayo on the underside of my bun. The act of providing seems to have brightened his mood. “You just write those books, make that money, go on *Ellen*. I’ll take care of the rest.”

The rest, he informs me, includes a house we will build ourselves, here in Mississippi.

“Not *here* here,” he says. “Somewhere in the country.”

We’ll have a rose garden and an in-ground pool, and two kids named Bentley and Mackenzie.

“That we’ll adopt?” I ask. A technical question seems the best way into my discomfort.

“No, silly. They’ll be able to switch one of our sperm to an egg by then.”

Bentley? “So who’s the egg?” I ask.

He’s already dressed for his opening shift at Panera Bread. There is a sneaky impudence in the fit of his khakis, taut around his ass, and in the rakish swoop of bangs that, per regulation, should be hidden beneath his cap. The same flirtation with the rules I caught in his voice the day we met, when I stopped for lunch on the way back to campus from a weekend in Memphis, the smirking way he called me “sir” scattering my brains. I scarfed down my Frontega Chicken Panini in a corner booth and, dazed with carbs, scribbled my phone number on the bottom of my receipt.

Lips that meet authority or intimidation with a smirk. Green eyes scuffed with bronze; lacy black lashes. Cheekbones lined in baby fat. He is just eighteen. I am nineteen, but not just.

I lean across the counter to kiss him. My tongue parts his lips and opens his mouth, afloat in shrapnel.

He jerks his head back, scoffs. “I’m eating.”

I step around the counter. My fingers find his belt buckle. I drop to my knees.

“Go eat your sandwich.”

“It’s not going anywhere.”

“You’re gonna make me late.”

“Cum fast.”

“Doug’s home.”

“He’s passed out.” I don’t know if this is true, but it doesn’t matter. The apartment could be on fire for all I care.

He smells loudly of body wash and tastes warm. His hips buck into me, arrhythmic, racing the clock. My car keys, hooked to his belt, smack me in the neck. Halfway through my nose starts to run, my eyes stream, and lust ditches me to finish what it started.

I watch through the window as my car squeezes onto the main road, then help myself to one of the Mike’s Hard Lemonades Doug picked up last night on his way home from patrol. He pretends to buy them for himself, but I only ever see him drink Michelob Light. Every now and then, when he’s off duty and Cody and I are watching *Drag Race* on the sofa, he’ll pull a Mike’s from the fridge and half-watch over our shoulders, sipping joylessly from the bottle in his big paw and nodding to himself. In eighteen months I’ll turn twenty-one and this charade will be unnecessary.

A snore comes strangled from his room in the back. Before his bypass it used to sound like someone was murdering him all morning. Now it’s just the odd yelp or grunt that reminds us he’s home.

I arrange my books on the coffee table. Fridays I pack a bag and drive up here after my last class. Saturdays I catch up on homework while Cody is out providing for us. He hates to work during the little time we have together, but it’s an investment, he says, in our future.

“Like your studies,” he said once. “I’m supporting us until you can support us.”

He conjured an image of himself in nothing but booty shorts, vacuuming a vast white carpet, while I am away at work. I couldn't resist puncturing the fantasy, even as I felt myself rapidly hardening. "I don't think you understand," I said. "I'm an English major."

His wry lips went thin and serious. "You can be anything you want to be. You just have to want it."

First, an online quiz for my biology survey. The toucan on the book cover judges me as I Google the answers in a separate browser. Then a summary of Italian nationalism, names to remember. Fragments of Sappho. The first bottle of Mike's gets me all the way to British Lit, *Heart of Darkness*. My mind floats from black to black. Black water, black draperies, black-dressed ladies sitting side by side. I get up for another bottle. I can't taste the difference from Minute Maid and this scares me a little, how the thing that bites you can leave no sting, only sweetness, so it's too late when the paralysis sets in. I need to start drinking bitter things: gin and tonics, or just gin.

At some point I've dropped my Norton anthology on its spine, stretched out full-length on the sofa. The tan walls give off a fleshy glow in the shifting light through the blinds. Cody wants to paint this room teal. He wants to put a flowerbox in the window, mount a rainbow flag on the wall. Doug says he'll think about it. I wonder what's the use of changing anything in this tan cell, in this gated beehive, but I never say anything. Have I stopped bleeding?

Last night we stayed up in bed comparing our brief histories. He's had roughly one boyfriend a year since he was fourteen. Trying to pretend his depth didn't disturb me, I saw my breadth disturbed him.

"You can't even guess?"

I shrugged. “Somewhere I lost count.”

“And you never dated any of these people?”

“No,” I said, angling for tenderness. “You’re my first.”

He’s also the first to fuck me, a title he defends when jealous. When it was still dark, I woke to the A/C breathing on my spine. He’d pulled the covers back and was lying on his side, studying the length of my body, his eyes hard in the dark. My mind was sludgy with sleep. I opened my mouth but couldn’t speak. He climbed behind me, pried my legs apart with his knees. I reached for the drawer where we keep the lube but he pinned my wrist with one hand and spat in the other. Still unawake, I held the position and wondered what my body was doing on all fours in this bed eighty miles from school.

It was one of the times when I love it.

Another snore, then a more human noise of surprise and Doug is awake. He stumps into the living room in a black T-shirt tucked into black gym shorts—a slippery seal, clumsy on carpet.

“Morning,” he says through slitted eyelids.

“Good morning. See anything crazy last night?” Alone with Doug, I struggle for words. Without Cody beside me on the couch, his arm around my shoulder, I feel I lack the proper context for being here.

Doug met Cody when a neighbor called 911 on an especially loud fight between Cody’s mother and her boyfriend. He gave Cody his cell phone number, with instructions to call him personally the next time. After that he picked up Cody a handful of times, for lifting forties from the Chevron or breaking the nose of some kid at school who’d called him a faggot. Doug took

Cody to Sonic or a movie, dropped him off at home, and smoothed things over in his report. Cody left his mother's house and moved in here just after he turned eighteen. It's not that his mom is homophobic, but one afternoon Cody's little sister found one of our condoms on the floor and brought it to show the dog.

"Couple noise complaints," Doug says. "Kids."

He bumps around the kitchen as if by sonar. "Can I make you some coffee?" I ask, my voice lemony and shrill.

"Nah." He opens the fridge, polishes his shiny scalp with his free palm, pulls out a can of Monster. Turning, he sees the disorder of books around me.

"What do they have you reading down there?"

"Heart of Darkness."

He shakes his head. "Man, you couldn't pay me to go back to school. I remember, one year they had us reading—what was it? *Ethan Frome*?"

I don't know what it was.

"Anyway," he says, "I've never been much of a reader."

I don't know what to say to this, which depresses me. These are not the conversations I saw myself having.

The Monster gets his eyes all the way open. "Is this yours?" he asks.

My sandwich, untouched on the counter. “Cody made it for me,” I say. “You can have it.”

He looks at the sandwich with newfound reverence. Neither Cody nor I have ever seen a trace of another man’s presence in the apartment, nor heard him speak of sex, not since he moved down here from Memphis.

“He really loves you, you know.”

Panic starts up in me. Is this a test? An accusation? “I really love him too,” I say before I can think too much.

*

An actor once played Doug in a dramatization for an episode of *True Crime Memphis*. He recorded the episode, and one night when we’re drunk enough to humor him he plays us the tape. We watch a svelte young Doug with a head full of elbow-macaroni curls skip down the front steps of a brownstone toward his car. *He was just leaving a friend’s apartment*, says the gravelly voiceover.

“I like you better bald,” Cody says.

Doug is standing at the curb, patting himself for his keys, when out of the shadows spring two figures in clown masks. One presses a gun to his back, the other a gun to his temple. “Get in,” says one motionless clown face.

“Actually they were the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,” says Doug. “But there was a copyright thing.”

Doug starts the car and drives, one clown in the passenger seat, one in the back.

“They could’ve just jacked the car,” he says, “but they were greedy. They had me drive to an ATM and take a couple thousand out of my account.”

“For gas,” I say. Cody gives me a look. “And legal fees.”

He pulls into a gas station with an ATM on the side. A pane of light crosses his forehead, exposing tiny drops of sweat.

“You boys want anything from inside?” he says in a hardboiled voice.

The clowns look at one another. Then the clown in back says, “Get us a case of PBR.”

“They were kids,” Doug says. “Suburban punks from Cordova. Guy in the back was just sixteen. Somehow they could get their hands on guns, but they fell for an adult offering them alcohol.”

“Let’s not throw stones,” I say and rest my head on Cody’s belly.

Doug walks to the ATM, collects the prescribed amount in large bills, then steps slowly around the apron and into the store. Inside the car, the camera hovers in the thoughtful space between the two tufts of clown hair.

It didn’t take long, says the voiceover, for these two stooges to realize their mistake. In the store with Doug, we see the car peel screeching out of the parking lot as the clerk dials 911. Cut to the car in broad daylight, under a bridge. Forensic officers stoop to tweeze hairs off the seats and drop them into baggies.

“They didn’t think to wear gloves,” Doug says. “Their prints were all over the place.”

The tape dissolves to snow, then blue. We sit for a moment in the light.

“For a long time after,” Doug says, “I didn’t want to admit how scared I was. Humiliated. At the complete mercy of a couple kids.”

“Is that why you became a cop?” I ask.

“Oh no,” he says. “I was already a cop.”

*

There’s a Walgreens a short, bad walk from the apartment. I make it from Doug’s welcome mat to the automatic doors without touching a blade of grass. We need vitamins, I think in my mother’s frantic voice. Two growing boys living on chicken patties and Lucky Charms and alcohol. We also need cigarettes. I’ve switched from Marlboro Reds to Cody’s Newports, which means I’m now buying all our packs to share. I don’t mind but, as with the car, I notice.

Seth, the cashier, spots me at checkout and lopes over to the counter.

“The usual?”

I’ve been coming here long enough to remember his name and not get carded. I’m not sure how old Seth is—a little older than me, his cheeks and jaw angular, snakebite piercings framing a large mouth given to grinning. He has a pear-shaped ass that lifts in his khakis as he reaches for the Newports. Maybe all I want, after all, is a man in uniform. *If I were free*, I think. The thought collapses instantly. Cody is the only reason I’m up here; if I were free, I’d never see Seth again. He sets the cigarettes down beside the vitamins and I try to think of something clever to say about this but nothing comes.

*

“How’s *Cody*?” Diane asks over the phone. Depending on her mood she says his name either like one she has just learned and is at pains to pronounce correctly, or like that of a barely-humored imaginary friend. She is testy today.

“He’s good,” I say, smoking on the front steps. “We’re good.”

“Yeah,” she says.

She wants to know about classes, how her car is holding up.

“That car was not built for long-distance relationships,” she says. “It was only ever meant to get you around town and take you home for holidays. *Maybe* the odd weekend trip.”

“I understand.”

“And may I remind you, you’re the only one insured to drive it.”

As if on cue, I see the beast in question nosing into the parking lot, Cody returning from work.

“Is he still living with that cop?”

“Doug. Yes.”

“Listen,” she says. “I’m not one to judge.” She clears her throat—a smug note to the untrained ear, but I can hear the anxiety constricting her voice. “But watch out for that cop. He’s up to something. Maybe he’s filming y’all having sex—”

“Please.”

“I know what goes on. He puts y’all up, buys you alcohol. What kind of grown man takes a risk like that unless he’s working some angle?”

Cody comes smiling up the steps. I feel elements about to collide.

“You’re out of line, detective,” I say quickly into the phone. “I’m taking you off this case. See you on Memorial Day.”

“Who was that?” Cody asks.

“My mother.” I roll my eyes as if we both know what this means.

“You never talk about your mom.” He lies shirtless on the bed. I kneel beneath him, tugging at his inverted khakis where one leg still clings to his calf.

“You just let me worry about her.”

“If we’re going to have a life together, we need to share things. I need to know—” But the pants leg pulls free and I pounce on him, crush the air from his lungs.

We shower together, though I haven’t done anything to get dirty all day. Our hair slicks down over our eyes and we kiss blind.

*

Back at school, I abstain from alcohol and nicotine. Focus eludes me; sex nibbles at the edges of my attention. I pause in my notes on British colonialism to recall how, that first time, it felt as if all my organs were migrating up toward my throat and I thought I would pee, or die.

I look up at the whiteboard and try very hard to be the person I think I am, who cares about the machinations of history.

But that second time! When, afterwards, he started to pull his hips back and I clamped them in place with my legs. “What’s your hurry?” I said. “Stay awhile.”

*

Friday night, I let myself in to the sound of hammering. Cody, in an orange swimsuit and nothing else, is installing a spice rack on the wall by the kitchenette. His back faces me, the delectable thumbprints on either side of his tailbone. I slink up behind him and plant a kiss on his sweaty neck.

“Shit!” He twists around, hammer raised. Recognizing me, his eyes lose their panicked glint and just look tired. “Don’t ever sneak up on me.”

“Sorry.” I take a step back. All at once I can feel the whole drive in the back of my neck. Cody turns to the wall again. I check the fridge and am relieved to find Chardonnay. Something more grown-up, even if it is something Diane would drink. I fill a juice glass with it and take it into the bedroom to unpack. When I have put everything away, I strip and splay myself on the bed. I try out how I’d like to be discovered—on my stomach with one leg cocked; on my side, starfished and facedown. His hammering runs out in time with my wine. Without getting up I cut the overhead light, turn on the strip of Christmas bulbs that line the headboard. The door does not budge. Drawers rattle open and shut. I bury my face in a pillow.

I wake to Doug cursing in the kitchen. “What the fuck, man?”

“It looks good. It took me all afternoon.”

“Did you think to ask me before you punched holes in my damn wall?”

“I can’t live somewhere I can’t make things mine.”

“Buddy, this is your home too, you know that. You’re more than welcome to decorate, just as long as—”

“And I want a dog.”

“Fuck me sideways.”

“I’m trying to make a life here. For us.”

“Us?” Doug’s voice downshifts. “Trust me, kid. He’s gonna be the first thing that goes.”

*

“Dad left when I was six.”

My bags are packed. I am supposed to be already on the road, but instead I’m lying over him in bed, hip to hip, nipple to nipple. He takes my hand and guides it over the signs of his father. A feather of scar tissue astride one thigh.

“That’s from a kitchen knife.”

Pale web of tissue in the crook of his left arm.

“Bic lighter.”

His father played baseball in college, but dropped out when Cody’s mother decided to keep her baby. Some mornings he took Cody into the backyard with a pail full of baseballs, set him up against the outside wall of the kitchen, and lobbed balls at him, balls he was supposed to

catch, but which came in such a swift, pelting rain that eventually the boy could do nothing except crouch to protect his face and testicles.

“He was like a machine. Winding back and pitching, winding and pitching. It was almost like there were no hard feelings.”

He’d lost teeth prematurely. A split lip never healed straight. I kiss his scars, put my mouth on the warped tissue. This only makes the smooth, symmetrical places more beautiful. When I was small, Diane would kiss my scrapes and cuts. I took it as fact that a mother’s lips had power to kiss away all hurt. I wonder if Cody’s mother ever kissed him like that, if he’d have believed there was any power in it if she had.

He parts his legs beneath me, wraps his ankles around my hips. I push myself up on my palms. To my surprise he reaches behind me for the lube drawer. He slicks his palm with silicone and takes me, hard, in his hand, guiding me downward. I replace his hand on my cock with mine.

“Up a little,” he whispers. “There.”

We make love for the first time. It isn’t that I am fucking him for the first time—which is true—but that, for the first time, my mind points at us, welded on the duvet, and babbles, *Making love, making love*, like an infant rejoicing at the name of something. I stay inside him for a long time after. He stares up at me.

“I’m loyal and I love hard. I’ll fight for you if I have to.”

“I know.”

“You’re getting yourself into a lot with me.”

“I want to.”

His mouth twists. Is it a smirk or a grimace? “You have no idea.”

*

The light is perfect all along the state highway. Overpasses frame scenes of wooded hills scarred by controlled burns. As I drive closer the frame falls away, the landscape unfurls in all directions. In the glove compartment I find a brand-new pack of Newports with the plastic still on. I take out my phone and text from the road, “I die again with each passing mile.”

Then the dorm, its monastic hush on Sundays, its narrow cloistral bed. I take out the homework I’ve neglected, turn on my lamp. In an hour he is only a warm glow at the edges of my mind, and this feels good too.

The Birthday Boy

There were two RVs parked in a wide L, one pearl gray, the other black. A fire crackled between them in a brick pit. As if the light from the flames weren't enough, spotlights nested in the trees flung the trailers into pale relief against the dark of the campsite. The gray one showed a stubble of glitter.

"This is Mickey and Minnie's place," Clark told me.

"Which one?"

"Both. The gray one is where they sleep. This one," he nodded toward the black RV, into which the men ahead of us were piling, "is the play trailer."

"Mickey and Minnie?"

"They're kind of infamous here," said the boy from Fort Worth, his arm around Clark's waist. "They have all the latest toys and like to show them off."

I was about to ask what this meant, but we'd come to the front of the line, and I had to squeeze ahead of them to climb the narrow steps.

It had been Clark's idea to take me here, to the gay men's retreat at Lake Limestone Ranch fifty miles east of Waco. I had just moved to Texas after finishing college in Mississippi and was rooming with Clark, whom I'd known peripherally at school. For a year now he'd been writing code for a security company in Austin.

"You'll love the ranch," he said this afternoon on the drive up. "I've found some great community there."

We arrived just in time for the welcome dance, on a pavilion overlooking Lake Limestone. Someone rigged up a smoke machine and laser lights that raked the smoke with purple tines. A projector dropped down one wall and played music videos: Madonna, Selena, Shania. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been around so many men, gay or not. Two hundred of us, from Austin, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, places that in their size and arrogance seemed to me more like Greek city-states than neighbors under the same flag. Clark and the boy from Fort Worth remembered one another from last year's retreat and started to dance. I leaned against a railing and watched. Unlike some of the other guys, who arched their backs and beat their groins avidly together, Clark and the boy were not interested in courting attention. They slid up against one another with a slow purpose, their arms and hips kindling a private fire in public. The music downshifted from "Bad Romance" to "Walkin' After Midnight." As if scripted, the men paired off and glided into a box step. I smiled and thought, "This is Texas." But this was half a charade. It was easier to smile at this pageant than to approach it, to find the seam shaped like the pose I was meant to strike. I got flushed and peeled off my tank top. I willed my skin to pull glances, while sifting out the ones I didn't want. But no one seemed to be looking at all.

I remembered Clark as a quiet, sweet kid, self-protective in baggy hoodies and sweats, with a round face and a monk's tonsure of dark curls. Like me he'd made no secret of being gay, but hadn't worn it comfortably. One year in Austin and he'd slimmed out, bulked up, pierced his left nipple, started an ink sleeve, and shaved off the last of his hair. He looked happier than I'd ever seen him. Now he and the boy kissed foreheads; the boy's nails raked the fur of Clark's chest. Their belt buckles clacked, and though I didn't want either of them I felt rage stroke me somewhere I couldn't place, an itch in my teeth.

When the music stopped, those of us who hadn't crept back to our tents started moving, for reasons unknown to me, toward the adjoining RV park.

The play trailer was dimly lit and packed with bodies. A knot of men crowded the entrance, red Solo cups in their hands. Some stood facing the opposite wall, where porn played mutely on two mounted TVs. On one screen a pair of fit blondes tussled on white sheets; on the other, a group of men in leather chaps pinned a cop to the floor of a public bathroom. Subtitles flashed in a language I couldn't make out as, one by one, the men pulled out their cocks and began to piss on the cop.

Clark led me toward the kitchenette, where two men stood behind a marble-topped bar. These must be Mickey and Minnie. Each had a druggy, preserved look, a pickled quality in the cheeks. One was tall and starved-looking, a Tom of Finland tank hanging from his clavicles. His partner was squat and shirtless; a pelt of salt-and-pepper fur coated him evenly from shoulders to gut. They could not have been less alike, but their smile was the same, a circus-master's smile of invested voyeurism.

"Clarkette," said the tall one as we neared the bar. Clark leaned over to have his cheeks pecked. "Lovely of you to make it." The boy from Fort Worth leaned over and received the same blessing.

"And who is this?" said the hairy one in a tone of mock offense. His eyes goggled at me, this stranger to his kingdom.

"This is Eric," said Clark. "He's new in Texas, so be sweet."

The hairy one's eyes popped even wider. "As if the good Lord made me any other way!" He reached under the bar. "May I get you a refreshment, Eric?"

I felt hot all over. It was something about the sound of my name in both their voices. "A shot of tequila, please."

The shot smoldered in my throat and face. I felt branded—that was it, my name in their voices, a kind of brand, as if I were something entirely new, unknown to myself. The skinny one cracked open a Shiner and poured it into a Solo cup. "You'll wanna chase that shot, honey, before it runs away with you."

I was a lightweight even for my small frame. With the first bready sip, I promised myself to make the beer last the rest of the night.

Heads were turning in our direction, but past us, to the far end of the trailer. There a leather sling hung from a steel frame, draped in light from a pink bulb in the ceiling. Three boys crowded in front of it. They looked about my age, probably undergrads at UT Austin or Dallas. They were the kind of gay boys I'd known in college who wore the fraternity costume as fetish gear—the spray of bangs tucked through the slot in the backwards cap, the thigh-baring khaki shorts—and were seen in photos either surrounded by a pack of identical boys or with beautiful girls hanging on their arms. You could sleep with them—when they weren't sleeping with each other—but in daylight, passing you on the town square, they wouldn't acknowledge you, not if you didn't look like that, act like that.

Now two of the boys were starting to strip the third, until he stood between them in nothing but a pair of red briefs. Someone behind me whistled. All three boys were drunk, but the one in red was visibly drunker than the others. His movements were languid as he allowed

himself to be pulled from his clothes. His curly head drooped when the shirt came off; he shimmied his hips to clamber out from the puddle of his shorts. Even when they had finished he didn't stand quite still but rocked on his feet, his long torso swaying in the pink light.

I took compulsive sips of my beer. The first few always went down thick and heavy; after that it was like water, hard to remember to slow down. The crowd flowed around me, pressing closer to the spectacle. The boy's friends had begun to hoist him astride the sling. Their eyes looked manic as they guided his wrists and ankles into the leather stirrups. Strapped in, he rocked a moment back and forth; then the sling gained equilibrium. He skimmed the crowd. A smug look mottled his handsome face. His eyes were opaque, but something flickered behind them, like a figure stepping past a steamed mirror. I was staring openly now. We all were—Clark, the boy from Fort Worth, Mickey and Minnie. He didn't see any of us, just the image of himself splayed across our faces.

A kind of alarm pulsed in my ears. But the harder it pounded, the more fixed I became, as if it were hammering my eyes to the spot. He hung there a moment in the pink light, only moving when a twitch of his arm or leg made the sling tremble. Then his friends moved to either side of him, one at each ankle. "A toast!" shouted the one on the left. "To the birthday boy!"

Birthday. It made sense now, the boy so much drunker than his friends, the same state of limp adoration in which I'd seen countless tiara-crowned women in bars. The sound in my ears abated a little. This was all normal, it had only taken a different form. Then, as the toasting boy lifted his beer, his comrade reached beneath the boy's briefs and peeled back the waistband, exposing the seam of his parted ass.

“To the birthday boy!” someone barked. Others began to take up the refrain. Solo cups lifted; heads tilted back to drink. I pried my gaze from the birthday boy and looked around me. Clark and the boy from Fort Worth shared a naughty grin and clacked their cups together. Mickey and Minnie were still flashing their ringmaster smiles. Stranger after stranger, ugly or just old, eyes and lips wet with alcohol, glaring and grinning.

A face met mine through the crowd. He wasn’t looking at the boy, he was looking at me. The face was thin and wiry, with a gladiator haircut, black commas stitched across the brow, and a mustache like a stain. He got up from his spot by the wall and wedged in beside me. “Pretty hot, isn’t it?” he said, nodding toward the sling.

I realized I could no longer find Clark in the crowd. “Yeah,” I said, from what sounded like the base of my throat.

He grinned. “What are you thinking about?”

I took a sip of my beer to think; I didn’t know what to say.

“You look like you want it,” he pressed.

What was he accusing me of wanting? The possibilities split in my mind. I was standing over the birthday boy, his waistband in my fist, his eyes full of me. I was stretched in the sling, open to the room, all those cheers pelting my body.

“I wonder,” I said “what it’s like. To be up there.”

His grin bent into a smirk; crow’s-feet flared from the corners of his eyes. “That could be arranged.”

By the time I opened my mouth again he'd moved on through the crowd.

*

I found Clark and the boy from Fort Worth in a circle of men around the fire pit. Mickey and Minnie had retired to the black trailer. The itch I'd felt at the dance passed from face to face, burrowed under the warmth of sweatshirts. Everyone was fidgeting and glancing around and wondering what to do next.

"I'll go wherever the birthday boy's going," said a barrel-chested guy in cowboy boots.

"The birthday boy is well secured," said a guy in a deerskin vest and no shirt. "He's not going anywhere anytime soon."

The boy from Fort Worth rested his head on Clark's shoulder. Clark nuzzled his hair, then caught me looking. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "Fine."

"I say we go down to the stabbin' cabin," someone said. Assent crackled through the ranks. I looked back at Clark. For once he wasn't smiling.

"I don't know about a stabbin' cabin," he said.

"That's quite a hike," said the boy from Fort Worth, popping his head up. "An hour's walk maybe."

"Y'all could take the golf carts," said the guy with the gladiator haircut. He'd pushed into the circle, a few heads down from me. The firelight gouged out his concave cheeks. An

embarrassed hush fell. Everyone seemed to notice him for the first time. If he perceived this, it only amused him.

“I take care of the grounds here. I can take y’all to where we keep the carts.”

On the way, Clark hung back with the boy from Fort Worth. The groundskeeper sidled up beside me.

“So, you like being tied up? Or just being watched?”

It took me a moment to realize he was continuing our talk in the trailer. Again I didn’t know what to say. It had been the first time I’d seen a sling outside of porn, and I was intrigued almost to the point of panic. But it seemed a moment that called for something other than simple honesty.

“I haven’t really thought about it,” I said, jerking my shoulders up and down. “You know. I’m open.”

He wasn’t handsome, but he put off a lot of heat, as if he’d smuggled a generator under his hoodie. What I said seemed to please him. His hand cupped my ass; I felt it shift against his palm as we walked. Belatedly I found I’d been getting hard each time he spoke.

The carts were parked on a dirt patch at the edge of the RV camp, beside a row of single-wide trailers. The groundskeeper let himself inside one of the trailers and came out with the hem of his sweatshirt turned up and full of keys. Men lined up like trick-or-treaters to take them, then started piling onto carts and assigning drivers. On one cart I saw the boy from Fort Worth slide into the second-last seat, and knew Clark would scramble up after him. When he did, his eyes met mine, then cast about the cart, as if a space might magically open up for me. As the cart

bucked forward onto the trail he gave me the goofiest look—*aw, shucks*—and called out, “See you down there!”

I shivered a little. “You’re freezing,” said the groundskeeper. He might have been counting my bare ribs.

“This is me,” he said, nodding to the trailer he’d just left. “Wanna come in, grab a sweatshirt before we go?”

Up the metal steps we seemed to step back thirty years. In the center of the hall was a Formica card table stacked with Vienna sausage cans, a carton of Marlboro Reds, a handle of Burnett’s vodka, a silty-looking bong. The only other furniture was a striped loveseat, one leg lacerated by a prior owner’s cat and spewing fuzz. Along a counter were framed pictures I didn’t want to look at.

“One sweatshirt coming up,” he said, vanishing through a doorway. “Need anything else?”

I thought of Clark whizzing off into the dark in only a tank and shorts. “Could I have one for my friend too?”

He ducked his head back into view, grinned. “Sweet boy.”

I smiled weakly back. While the groundskeeper rummaged through another room I went over to the card table and took a slug off the Burnett’s. I wondered if he would try to fuck me while he had me here in his sad domain, and whether I was drunk enough to let him. Before I could make up my mind, he came back in with two hoodies draped over his arm.

“Hands up,” he said a little sternly.

The others had left us a cart, a two-seater. The groundskeeper gunned the engine and pulled off onto a trail to our right, not straight, the way everyone else had gone.

“Shortcut,” he told me. “I know these trails like,” he laid his non-driving hand across my lap to show me the back. His fingers curled. “Well, well.”

My cock was hard, but he seemed less surprised by this than I was.

He drove fast. The trail was pocked and ridged and kept lifting us out of the seat. The dark spat shapes into range of the low beams—a tree root, a cluster of mushrooms, a spooked armadillo. We jolted over a pothole and he took his hand off my lap to grip the wheel. I saw no lights in the distance, heard nothing but the creak we made going over the ruts. Maybe we weren’t heading for the stabbin’ cabin after all. The thought mixed with the helium lift of booze in my blood. I felt boneless and pliant. I thought of the birthday boy placidly offering up his hands and feet to the stirrups.

“So,” I said, “how long have you been keeping the grounds here?”

“Two years. Just in the fall. Summers I work an oil rig off Galveston.” He looked over at me. “I’m more interested in you.”

In what certain parts of me look and feel like. I grinned stupidly at the thought. But I took his lead, started slurring away about my café job in Austin, my unpaid nonprofit internship.

“I’m,” I said with a hand flourish, “figuring myself out.”

“Mhm, mhm,” he kept saying, nodding along to the rhythm of my voice. Our lights sketched a left turn in the trail. “What do you say we check this out?”

“I thought you knew these trails like,” I said with a gamesomeness that surprised me, and prodded the back of his hand.

He winked. “You got me.” He took the turn and pulled under the spiny cover of a pine tree.

Whatever momentum I’d built up inside me abruptly died with the engine. The lights went out, and all I could see were the dusty brown outlines of the pine and the long weeds beside the cart. The groundskeeper slid toward me. Reflexively I scooted back to the edge of the seat.

“You’re a slippery thing. You must like being chased.”

I shrugged. “I guess I’m still deciding what I like.”

He laughed. “What else are these weekends for?”

He pushed up against me, took one of my wrists in each hand, and bound them together behind my back.

“There. I caught you.”

My eyes were starting to adjust. I noticed for the first time that his brows sprouted together in the middle, lending a deranged shadow to the look he was giving me. His mouth already hung open with a sloppy hunger. I opened mine. His tongue was coated in a metallic char of cigarette smoke. He kept wrenching his face off mine with a strangled animal noise, his eyes pallid in the dark, and pushing the pad of his thumb against my lips. As if kissing were an insufficient channel for his lust, as if he had to smudge me out of existence.

“I want to taste you,” he said.

He twisted me around by my trapped wrists and I complied, folding myself over the seat on my stomach. Holding my wrists in place with one hand, with the other he removed my shorts in one swift tug. Cold air washed my ass and legs, then I felt the blunt wedge of his face in me. His hands clamped my wrists behind my back; I couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to. All I could do was lie there, as the trees separated themselves from the dark, and grope my way along the turns that had led me here. Until I was back in the crowded trailer with the birthday boy suspended in air.

He pried his face out of me. "I want your come," he said. My cock was still hard, mashed against the seat and wetting the plastic, but suddenly my own orgasm seemed a last desperate source of light and heat. I couldn't bear to have it snuffed out, to see myself plainly in the dark, slumped over this man's cart with my shorts around my ankles. When he flipped me back around and bent his face toward my cock, I covered it with my freed hands. He looked up at me, flustered and hurt, a clear strand of something—his spit, mine?—looping from lip to chin. In the end I finished him off with my hand, watched him splatter the dry dirt.

We pulled back onto the main trail. Soon the trees opened up around us and the other carts appeared, parked at sloppy angles all over a field. Far from the smoking campfires, the sky was clear and loaded with stars. Among the carts, flashlights licked the boards of a tin-roofed shack.

"You were delicious," the groundskeeper said. I smiled thinly at him and stumbled out, scooping up the sweatshirt I'd saved for Clark. I headed toward the cabin. Stars had weight out here; they pressed me into the earth. Through the corner of my eye I saw the groundskeeper slouch down in his seat and light a cigarette.

The door to the cabin hung ajar on rotten hinges. Inside I could hear the hushed commingling of bodies, sounds that were never as obvious as they were in porn—the actorly moan, the slurp and pop of a cock in a hand or mouth—because they weren’t made for you at all, except that you were welcome to pick up the scraps that carried on the air. Clark and his boy were probably in there somewhere, bodies doubled against a wall. I looked down at the sweatshirt in my hands; it suddenly seemed a pathetic, motherly gesture. I stalled in the doorway. I thought with an ache of the birthday boy.

And there he was. His long body sprawled across the seat of a golf cart parked beside the far wall of the cabin. He was now in a T-shirt and sweats, both of which looked borrowed, baggy on him. Without the pink light on his skin he looked bled of power. His eyes were closed. One of his friends from the trailer, the one who’d pulled down his briefs, sat up in the seat, cradling the boy’s head in his lap.

The friend saw me watching. “Poor baby,” he said to the boy’s placid face. “Tuckered himself out.” His mania in the trailer had cooled. He looked gentle now, like the Virgin in a pieta. Who knew how many shots he and his comrade had fed the boy before exhibiting him to the whole trailer, how many men had fucked him tonight, yet here he was stroking the boy’s curls, as if indulging a naughty child.

“Is he okay?” I asked.

“He’s a little slut is what he is.” The boy’s brow crinkled, but his eyes stayed closed. “Aren’t you a little slut?” The friend jiggled his knees, making the boy’s head loll side to side. The boy reached out an arm to knead the friend’s chest. “Fuck off,” he said through barely parted lips.

My face felt hot as the fire pit at Mickey and Minnie's, hours, a lifetime ago. I felt the extremes of hot and cold meet without reducing either to a bearable warmth. The boy stretched himself longer on the seat. His shirt rode up toward his ribs, exposing the strip of dark, springy fur that ran into his sweats. I watched it arch slightly with his shallow breaths. Neither the friend nor I spoke a word. I took slow steps toward the cart, until I was standing over the boy. Each step reminded me of where I was still wet. Dew had begun to dampen the grass. I dropped Clark's sweatshirt at my feet, got down and knelt on it. My face was level with that stretch of bare skin.

I reached out a hand and pinched the seam of the boy's T-shirt. The friend watched me with glazed amusement. I knew he wouldn't stop anything I might do—not even if I pulled the boy's shorts down and took him in my mouth; not if, somehow managing to get him hard, I climbed onto the cart and tried to ride him. The warmth of his skin kissed my wrist. With my other hand I hooked two fingers around the waistband of his sweats, lifted it. He wasn't wearing the red briefs now; his cock lay flaccid but thick in its nest of pubic hair. Fingers shaking, I pulled the shirt hem down low and released the waistband to tuck it.

The snap of the band was like coming out of a dream. I stumbled to my feet. My hands burned in the dark. The boy's eyes flicked open and saw me. The dark swirled around his pupils like water in a drain. I looked back.

Mobile Home

Leanne

“I am just not gonna be in a hurry,” she said to herself. Committing to this decree, she began to move around the house with painstaking leisure, her forehead creased in thought, which, though she was only forty, made her eyes protrude slightly in a milder version of the stare men in her family adopted at seventy—“the Delaney mile,” an aunt called it. She let Cole sleep in and insisted on making a real breakfast before they got on the road.

“You’re just gonna foul up more dishes and set us back,” Paige said as Leanne set up the waffle iron. They’d been together three years and still some things Paige said—*foul up*—rattled afterward in Leanne’s brain. “We can stop at a Pilot station with a McDonald’s or something.”

“Beth and Khaki aren’t expecting us ‘til Thursday,” Leanne said. “We don’t have a timetable.”

Paige puckered her mouth and blew a needle of air at her shoes. “Lemme get Cole up.”

“You are not going to wake him up,” said Leanne. It felt like practice, should she need it, for the day she told Paige she was never going to see Cole again. “I’m gonna wake him up with breakfast.”

The waffles made her late with laundry, and at 12:30, when they were supposed to have left Jackson half an hour ago, Paige started pulling clothes out of the dryer.

“We can live with a few wet socks,” she said.

Leanne, who had allowed a splash of gin into her orange juice, giggled. “We’ll be real mountain women. Dying of trench foot in our mobile home.” She finally managed to coax Paige into finishing the dryer cycle.

Cole

Upstairs, with no one telling him what to do, he went lazily around his room, picking up toys and setting them back down. He knew from weekends at his Nana’s house in Biloxi that the toys would look different when he came back to them, shrunken somehow. It always made him sad for some reason he couldn’t place, turning them over in the late afternoon light. And now they would be gone an unheard-of length of time—a whole week and a half! Maybe his Darth Vader and his Happy Meal triceratops and his snake made of painted wooden ribs would be unrecognizable by then. When he grew too old for toys he guessed he would gather them all up and carry them out to the fire pit in the backyard, where they would all melt together in a blob. But there was still plenty of time before that.

“Boogieman, what are you doing?”

Paige stood in the doorway fully dressed. Most days she wore a shirt with a collar and pants. This had confused Cole at first; the only shirt he’d ever seen Mom wear was the long Mickey Mouse one in which she sometimes slept. For a while he’d called Paige “he.” It had delighted him to have another boy around, a very tall and strong one who could pick him up under the arms and lift him to touch the squiggly white veins in the ceiling. Mom and her friends had kept correcting him in that gentle voice that made him angry to the point of tears. Why were they trying to take his new boy friend away from him? Then Paige told him she wanted to teach him how to take a shower standing up instead of sitting down in the bath. When he stepped

inside the stall, Paige stood there naked, with breasts she'd been hiding the whole time under her shirts and a flat, tucked-in place, like Mom's, where his own penis was.

"It *is* you," he'd said, which is what Belle says to the Beast when he turns into a prince. Mom, Paige, and their friends often said this back to him, in the *laughing with you* kind of way.

"You were supposed to be getting dressed," Paige went on. "We were supposed to be on the road an hour ago." She pointed to the T-shirt and shorts she'd laid across his bed.

"I prefer these." He pinched the sleeve of his pajama top, which had hammerhead sharks on it. "I don't have to wear a uniform today. Is it illegal to wear pajamas in a mobile home?" Paige had recently taught him that certain things were either *legal* or *illegal*, which had opened up a world of questions.

Paige sighed. "It's illegal if I say it is. Pajamas are for sleeping in. My momma and daddy didn't send me to a school with uniforms and you don't see me going around in pajamas."

Cole didn't think much of Paige's momma and daddy, it struck him, and neither did Mom. At Christmas dinner at their house in Utica, Paige's mother had seen Cole using a fork with his left hand and tried to make him use his right instead.

Leanne

Around two, a fight broke out over the dog. Honey, a nine-year-old toy poodle, had been Paige's rescue baby two girlfriends ago. She'd bought him as a puppy whose prior owner had fed him milk sweetened with his namesake. As a long-term effect, his teeth were blackened little kernels, his fur separated into flimsy white boles around seams of pink flesh, and he shook like a washing machine. It amazed Leanne to see so much tension on so meager a frame; coming near

Honey made her feel electric. Just two months earlier Paige had driven him all the way to the animal hospital in Starkville to have a specialist check his labored breathing. Leanne thought any vet who didn't euthanize the animal on sight should have his license revoked, but Honey had come home in a neck brace that was supposed to redistribute pressure on his lungs.

"I am not going to spend my vacation nursing this dog," said Leanne. Honey blinked up at them over his brace, like an inbred royal posed for his portrait.

"Leanne, I know you don't feel like I do, but I love this dog. What if he dies while we're gone and I didn't get to say goodbye?"

"He could die on the road, baby, and then what would we do? Bury him off I-20?"

"We'll cremate him!" said Cole.

"Boogieman, put your clothes on," said Paige.

"We can board him at the vet," said Leanne.

"We don't have an appointment. We could be there all day."

"I am not gonna be in a hurry," Leanne almost wailed. "I haven't had a real vacation since Claire died and I am not going to be given marching orders."

Cole looked sadly at the dog. "Poor Honey," he said. He got down on the pallet beside him—Leanne didn't know how he could stand the smell—and put his arm around the neck brace.

"Fine," Leanne said. "I'm outnumbered. The gang's all coming."

Cole

It delighted him that a home could be mobile, that its bed and counters and walls could remain in place while whirling through the world. It wasn't like a car—a car was supposed to move, there was nothing thrilling about stepping into one from the playground and stepping out in the driveway. But a home was just as much what you saw out the window as it was the window itself. When they stopped to gas up, he would approach the door slowly, like Dorothy stepping out into Oz, not knowing what he would encounter.

In ways it was not quite like a home. He slept on a pallet that came out of the wall instead of in a bed. The toilet had no water in it until you pushed a button that also opened a round eye at the bottom of the bowl. Cole didn't trust the arrangement enough to poop in there, and would hold it until the next stop. In the mornings they ate cereal from tiny boxes that poured out one serving each; instead of having the same cereal every morning for a week, you could wake up each day and have whatever kind you wanted. Lunch was Vienna sausages and fruit cocktail or chicken á la king on white bread. Somewhere in Alabama they stopped at a catfish place and when the waitress asked Cole what he would like to drink, he said, "I'll have a gin and tonic, please." Mom turned bright red and Paige said, "That boy is not right," before ordering him a sweet tea. On the road Mom drank chardonnay from tiny bottles and Paige drank Crown Royal with Diet Coke from the green plastic cup she always carried around. She handed Cole the purple bag the Crown came in, to hold any interesting rocks he might find on the trip.

Leanne

They were going the long way from Jackson to Asheville—through Georgia, so Paige could show Cole a cave. She had also wanted to visit Stone Mountain, where there was a famous

carving of the Confederate generals, but Leanne hadn't seen the point of going out of one's way to bear witness to a bunch of literal losers. Leanne wouldn't really have minded. She had to admit that there was a certain comfort in being moved around this way. One moment you were inviting a girl back to your tiny Jackson studio for a drink; the next you were building a house together out in Rankin County, and she was inseminating you with donor sperm all the way from California. You were shaking hands with another girl at a bonfire, and then you were rollicking through the Rockies with her and your son in what always reminded you of a giant Dixie cup turned on its side, Styrofoam-white with a powder-blue streak across the flank. It amazed Leanne that life could just happen to you if you sat back and let it. Or even if you didn't. Claire had known exactly what she wanted from life—Leanne, or someone like her; a house in the country to fill with dogs and children (she would not have stopped with Cole, whatever Leanne's protestations, she'd already been talking about adopting another from China); and to clean the teeth and gums of developmentally challenged women at the state hospital. And then—wham! T-boned on her way to work by a teenager out of her mind on Benzedrine. Life had a way of halting forward motion and sweeping those who were already drifting even further out to sea. If life could do that, then you held on to what you could, as long as you could.

“Who are we going to see?” Cole asked her the first morning.

“My friend Beth and her partner Khaki,” said Leanne. “You remember Beth, don't you? When Claire went to heaven we stayed with her for a while.”

Leanne had been surprised to hear from Beth at all, let alone be invited to her and Khaki's summer house in Asheville. They had been friends at Ole Miss Law; then Beth had launched a private practice in Jackson while Leanne had gone to work for the state.

“I don’t understand why you hide your light under a bushel at the A.G.’s office,” Beth said to her once. “I’ve seen you in court: you’re a lioness. You could be making a real name for yourself. Making real money.”

“You don’t see what it *takes* to turn me into a lioness,” Leanne said. Claire could attest that, for days leading up to a rare court appearance, Leanne woke with tremors, refused food, and started drinking before lunch. She’d once had a country doctor write her a short-term script for Klonopin just to get her from bed to the courthouse.

Claire had named Beth executrix of her will. In the weeks following the accident, Beth was among the many friends and relatives who gathered to help Leanne with Cole; he was three then. Claire and Leanne had just mounted an addition on the house. Contractors had knocked out a wall in the living room; tarps and dust shrouded everything. Leanne spent most of her days drinking in bed, where she would be visited like an invalid by groups of friends bearing something for her to eat or smoke or sign. One day they were left alone, Beth sitting across the bed from Leanne, trading a cigarette back and forth.

“You know you can’t live like this, Leanne. All these people coming and going, the house in ruins. Think about Cole.”

“I am thinking about Cole,” Leanne said in what seemed her only tone of voice in those days, bruised and barely audible.

“I know, honey. So why don’t y’all come and stay with me awhile? I’ve got two empty bedrooms. You and Cole can take all the time you need to rest and get back on your feet.”

For reasons unknown to Leanne, Beth fired the contractors and hired a team of her own to finish the addition on the house. It did not occur to Leanne until they were living with her how much Beth adored her son. Some days, after Leanne went back to work, Beth told her to forget daycare and stayed home with Cole herself, working from her study. The boy delighted in Beth's matching terriers, Scotch and Soda, and would sit rapt and still on the rug as Beth released Moses, her white cockatoo, from his cage to stalk in slow circles around Cole, squawking, "Hello! Hello!" One Saturday she shocked Leanne by coming home with a brand-new tricycle and taking Cole out riding on the wide, undisturbed streets of her gated neighborhood.

Leanne had just put Cole to bed one night when Beth crept into the doorway. "Care for a nightcap?"

"I hope you know how much I've loved having you both here," she said over whiskey—Leanne had pulled her start time back to five o'clock but otherwise allowed herself to drink as much as she wanted. "So I know you won't take this the wrong way: I want to help with Cole."

"You have helped us," Leanne said. This sounded stiff, like something you said to a benefactor rather than an old friend.

"It's been my pleasure. Really. I can't thank you enough for sharing him with me. I think there's a reason we're all together. Don't get me wrong," she said, lifting a hand to heaven, "God will never be able to explain to me why He took Claire, except that maybe she truly was too good for this world. But we still have each other. And I think it really does take a village."

"What are you saying?" said Leanne.

"I'm saying...Cole's going to be starting at St. Cecilia's soon, which I know ain't cheap."

“I can afford St. Cecilia’s,” Leanne cut in.

Beth forced a smile. “You see? I always said you were a lioness. I know you can afford it, but what about college? Most of Claire’s assets went to the addition, and I didn’t see any college fund.”

“He’s three,” said Leanne. “There’s plenty of time for me to save. And he’ll get scholarships.”

“He’ll be brilliant.” Beth’s smile now looked punctured. “Honey, I just want to make sure he has all the opportunities—”

“Yes, you’re quite the opportunist, aren’t you?”

“Leanne—”

“You want to adopt him. Is that it? Take him off my unfit hands?” She reached for the bottle between them, knowing this wouldn’t help her case.

Beth straightened in her chair. “I’d like to be his godmother. That’s what Claire was. She was more than that, of course, but in the eyes of the Church... I’d like power of attorney—statutory and medical—and I’d like to set up a trust in his name, to which you and I would each have access, and to which he would gain access when he turns eighteen. Aside from that, I’d like to see him on a regular basis, and see *you*, take you both to dinners and plays and on trips in the summers. That doesn’t sound so horrible, does it?”

Leanne had to admit, if only to herself, that it did not. “Why would you do all this?” she asked.

“Because I care about you, and I love your son.”

“You *care* about me, and you *love* my son.” She could hear herself start to sound sludgy.

“Let’s not parse words right now; it’s late. Just promise me you’ll think about it, okay?”

“Okay.”

They drank in silence for a moment; then Leanne said, “I’m not a charity case, you know.”

“I know.”

“I’m just in grief.”

“I know.”

And she had thought about it, but in the end had been unable to stomach the idea. Just before the start of the school year she packed their things and they returned to the house. Cole cried a little saying goodbye to Scotch, Soda, and Moses. At the door, with a taut expression, Beth handed Leanne a manila envelope. “For Cole,” she said. Leanne hadn’t been able to resist opening it when they got home; inside was a small stack of savings bonds.

She didn’t hear from Beth again until a month later, when she called to invite her to a campout. “I hope you don’t find this presumptuous,” she said, “but there’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Paige golfed with Beth on weekends. She was lean and tan from climbing telephone poles for BellSouth, and, already half-drunk when Leanne met her, she moved with an Elvis-like swagger that was strangely appealing. Cole loved her immediately—she picked him up and swung

him toward the bonfire, snatching him back screaming at the last second—and when the fire banked and people started staggering toward their tents, Paige led Leanne and Cole instead toward her mobile home, parked far out on the campsite.

“So luxurious,” Leanne said.

“I hope you feel like a queen,” said Paige, and she had.

*

They stopped at a resort twenty miles outside Atlanta that was little more than a pebbled lot off the highway, with a faded clapboard bungalow for an office and a pool in the back. Paige had picked the place because a shuttle to the nearby caverns picked up there twice a day.

“Who wants to take a dip?” Leanne said when they had parked and checked in at the office. Paige changed into her sleek one-piece bathing suit, black with an oblong of green down the chest, that with her wraparound sunglasses made Leanne think of a sexy bug. Over her own two-piece Leanne wore one of Claire’s white collared shirts and a straw hat. She slicked her face with enough sunscreen that it showed in whorls like plaster on her cheeks. Paige’s shoulders and knees glistened with coconut tanning oil of which Leanne disapproved—on summer nights she combed Paige’s body for new or irregular moles—though she secretly loved the smell.

“I don’t wanna wear a shirt,” Cole complained.

“Either you wear a shirt or we put sunscreen on your front and back,” said Leanne, “and you don’t like that either. But those are your choices.”

“Paige doesn’t wear sunscreen.”

“Paige isn’t fair-skinned like you and me.”

“Boogieman, you’re gonna wear the sunscreen or your shirt,” Paige interjected. “Because Mom said so, okay?”

“I was trying to explain,” Leanne said.

“He don’t always have to know why,” said Paige. “Sometimes all you’ve gotta know is, ‘I’m the grownup.’”

Cole picked the shirt. He screwed up his face as Leanne slathered sunscreen on it, pretended to choke when she pulled the cord of his straw hat to his chin. He looked like a doll of her in the hat and big sunglasses, holding her hand as they stepped out to the pool. It was empty except for the dark shapes of rotting leaves along the cement floor, a scrim of winged ants on the surface. Yellowed, once-white pool chairs sat at angles with their plastic bands sagging. The only other people out were a large woman and a skinny girl who looked to be about twelve. The woman stretched out on a pool chair in a two-piece with a pleated fringe. The girl, a few chairs down, sat cross-legged peeling an orange. Her pastel-pink bikini matched her extremely pale skin so closely Leanne thought for a panicked moment that she was naked.

Leanne knew how to swim but chose not to. She parked her inner tube against the deep end and set a fat Patricia Highsmith omnibus on the concrete in front of her, a beer beside it. Paige taught Cole the pencil, jackknife, and cannonball. After a few of these, the boy started doing his own interpretations. He jumped, wiggled his torso in air, and splashed down on his butt.

“And just what do you call that?” said Paige.

“The king cobra!”

Tom Ripley was in Rome perfecting his identity theft of Dickie Greenleaf. She’d read it twice before and still these passages gave her a deep thrill. To be somewhere else, to vanish into someone else, and thereby to be no one at all. Leanne had been to Rome, on a breakneck four-city European tour her mother had bought them when Leanne graduated high school, but all she remembered now was her mother twisting her ankle near the Spanish Steps and the two of them spending the rest of the day waiting to see a doctor.

A few fat droplets darkened the tissue-thin page. The pale girl had come to stand over her. The pieces of her bikini welded to her body like strips of prosthetic skin.

“Hey lady,” she said. She was staring baldly at Leanne but did not, Leanne thought, understand the implications of eye contact. Her voice was clanging and flat like an old school bell.

Leanne looked up at the girl, grateful for the cover of her sunglasses. She never knew when it would come over her, this shameful test of speaking to a child not her own.

“Hey lady,” the girl said again. “Take your shirt off.”

“Sweetheart,” Leanne said slowly, “where is your mother?”

“Over yonder.” The girl turned her head in the direction of the large woman, who stared out at the water with the expression of someone so used to being harried her face had stuck that way.

“This is a pool,” the girl said. “You don’t wear a shirt. Take it off.”

Claire had been wonderful with children, and adults with children's minds. Leanne thought of the women whose teeth and gums Claire had cleaned at the hospital, how they rushed Claire in the courtyard on mornings Leanne drove her to work. "Dentist woman!" one of them shouted. Leanne had always hesitated to get out of the car—not out of fear, she thought, but some curious embarrassment with herself.

"I will not," she said, trying to keep her voice as level as possible but sounding more like a stubborn child herself. "Now please go over to your mother and let me read my book."

All this time Paige and Cole had been holding their breaths in the shallow end. Paige shot up, then Cole, spluttering.

"I win!" Cole shouted. "I held it for 106 seconds."

"Is that right?" said Paige. "Lemme hear you count."

"One-two-three-four-five-six—"

"I don't think so, buddy. Like this: one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi—"

"Take it off, take it off!" the girl continued.

Paige squinted toward the deep end. Her hair slicked diagonally over her brow. "What's going on?"

Leanne swiveled around on her inner tube. She tried to make her voice carry over the water, but not so loud the girl's mother would hear. "This girl keeps telling me to take my shirt off. She won't leave me alone."

“Take your shirt off, lady!”

Paige snorted, then broke into open laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Leanne said, forgetting to control her volume.

“Well, you heard her,” said Paige. “Take it off!”

“Yeah, Mom!” said Cole, his face crinkling with glee. “Take it off!”

Woman and child struck up a chant of, “Take it off, take it off!” The girl, apparently satisfied her message had spread, stood silent now.

“Stop it!” Leanne pleaded. All at once she felt dangerously close to tears. No one noticed the girl’s mother rising from her chair and crossing the concrete to stand beside her daughter.

“I guess y’all are having a good laugh at my child’s expense,” she said in the pinched voice of a school librarian.

“Do you see me laughing?” Leanne shot back. She wrestled one leg out of the inner tube and began to climb out onto the edge, wishing mid-act that she’d thought to swim to the ladder instead. The woman pulled her daughter back by the elbow to give Leanne room. Leanne’s sopping shirt splashed the open book. She shut it with a snap, snatched up her tube, towel, and beer, and without looking at the girl or her mother, started walking toward the gate.

“Mom?” came Cole’s voice, startlingly close at her back. She felt his wet hand clamp onto her arm. “Mom?”

The boy stood right behind her, still dripping from the pool. His face looked stricken.

“Sweetie, let go of me please.”

“I’m sorry!” he said, breathless.

With one jerk of her arm, sloshing a little of her beer, she managed to detach his fingers.

“Stay with Paige,” she said. “Y’all have fun.”

She found some shower stalls behind the pool and took a scalding rinse. When they came back to the mobile home Paige and Cole found her sitting cross-legged on the bed, wrapped in a bathrobe and passing the hairdryer over the pages of her book. Paige busied herself in the living area feeding Honey, which had slipped Leanne’s mind. Cole approached the bed shyly.

“What is it, sweetie?” Her shower had left her feeling warm, soft, and forgiving.

“I’m sorry,” Cole whispered. He fidgeted as if there were a force field around the bed.

“It’s okay.” She dropped the dryer and held out her arms. The boy crawled up into her lap. “You didn’t start it.”

Paige’s voice came from the living area. “Boogieman, if you’re in the bed in those wet trunks I will whoop your butt.”

Leanne felt Cole’s body tense through her robe. “No one’s ever gonna do that to you,” she whispered in his ear. The dryer, which she had forgotten to turn off, continued to push warm air at the wall.

Cole

He did not even see Mom the morning they went in the cave.

“I’m claustrophobic,” he could hear her saying in the bedroom.

“It’s not like a *cave* cave where you go down a hole with a rope,” said Paige.

“You and Cole will have more fun without me. Have some boy time.”

He and Paige had breakfast—a tiny box of Honey Nut Cheerios for him, a tiny box of Froot Loops for her—then set off to wait for the bus. This time he made no complaint as Paige put sunscreen on his face, arms, and legs. On the bus to the caves he did a lot of thinking. Things he loved from afar had lately become real and touchable—most recently a ball python named Delilah on the first-grade trip to the Jackson Zoo; the kids had been invited to come up and touch her, draped over the shoulders of her handler. Cole loved snakes—cobras were his favorite, then pythons, then corals—so why had he stood there, frozen to the spot, with a real live snake in front of him?

“I’m growing a beard here!” said Gregory, in line behind him. He was a bully and had been since pre-K.

“Gregory, that is rude,” said Mrs. Linnell. “Cole, you don’t have to touch her if you don’t want to.”

It was this, more than what Gregory had said, that made him angry enough to forget his fear and stagger up to the gleaming coils of Delilah. Of course he wanted to touch her. He knew more about snakes than anyone in the class.

“You probably think she’ll be slimy, right?” said the handler.

“No,” said Cole. He knew from reading a book that she wouldn’t be; but when he stuck his hand out, and saw it shaking against the calm oblongs of Delilah’s flesh, he wasn’t sure he

believed enough in the things he'd read. He muttered, "Excuse me," and hurried to the back of the room, hearing not just Gregory but several other kids beginning to laugh.

He wasn't going to fail now like he'd failed with Delilah. He held tight to Paige's hand as they approached the entrance to the cave. A few people were already waiting—a clump of grownups and two kids, one big, one little. Cole looked for the lady Mom had yelled at and her weird daughter, but they weren't here. One grownup had on a red helmet like a firefighter's with a flashlight in the middle. He checked his watch as Paige and Cole joined the group.

"Are we all ready?" he said.

Just inside the entrance was a tub full of the same red helmets. Paige put on her own, then Cole's, shifting his straw hat to hang at his chest. The helmet was too big; the strap wobbled under his chin. He noticed that the big kid, a boy, walked past the box without taking one. He pointed this out.

"Don't you want the full experience?" said Paige.

A switch on the side of the helmet turned on the flashlight, but they didn't seem to need it. It was brighter inside than he'd imagined, lit with a gray-yellow glow, and much roomier. He felt a thrill at his total lack of fear that immediately deflated into a sense of being cheated. They walked along a path with railings on either side and never had to stoop or crawl. The grownup who had been wearing a helmet before everyone else led the way, pointing things out as they went.

"Check out those icicles," said Paige. She pointed to a shelf of rock from which hundreds of skinny, closely spaced stalactites dripped.

“We call that the dragon’s jaw,” said the guide. “See the stalactites? Like fangs.”

“I see it,” Cole said. He wanted to make the big kid hear him without seeming to raise his voice. But the boy did not hear. He walked ahead of Paige and Cole beside two grownups who were probably his mom and dad.

“And here,” said the guide as the trail dipped deeper into the earth, “we have the dragon’s boneyard.” A pile of broken rock climbed up the side of the wall to their left. Cole thought he could make out a string of rocks in the shape of a spine. All around him he heard the slow trickle of water.

“Imagine that you have all the time in the world,” the guide said. “Imagine watching one of these stalactites form, one drop of water at a time, dragging infinitesimal deposits of calcium carbonate down from the ceiling of the cave. Some of these are over a hundred thousand years old.”

Cole almost gasped, but then he saw the big kid’s head droop, heard his shoes scuff the stone floor. This wasn’t cool to him. Oh well. It was cool to *him*. A hundred thousand years. He could barely remember a time before Paige came to live with them. He knew before Paige there had been Claire. Claire had worn a red velvet jacket with big gold buttons. She had put on her lipstick in the mirror while he splashed in the tub. “Hey boogiemán,” she had said into the mirror, seeing him even though her back was turned. Then she was hit by a car and went to heaven. He knew all this had happened, but it felt far away, like the stories Mom told him about before he was born.

“Do you remember what you said when you were *really* little, about being in my belly?” she sometimes asked him.

“It was dark,” he would say. “There was warm water and cool water.” Saying it, he could see it—like the curving walls of this cave, but smooth, without stalactites, and with a noise more like waves at the beach than this everywhere-trickling. It made Mom happy to hear him say he remembered; but when he tried to recall the first time he’d said these things, he could only hear them in her voice.

They came to a set of steps going down at angles into the dark. At the end of the steps was a metal ramp and, connected to it, the boxy white shape of a boat. Another guide, a girl with a ponytail coming out the back of her helmet, waited at the ramp.

“And now we come to our voyage over water,” said the guide. “Angela here will ferry us across the lake. We will sail under the dragon’s eye and past a limestone formation we call his heart. It will come so close you’ll be able to touch it as we go past.”

A dragon’s heart. Cole shivered. The lights on their helmets made flat circles on the dark water below. Angela began helping people down the ramp. “Right this way, ma’am,” she said to Paige.

“How did she know to call you ma’am?” Cole whispered as they took their seats.

“Hush,” Paige said. She quickly smoothed her hand over his back to let him know she wasn’t mad.

It was darker on the lake. The guide turned on a real flashlight and flung it at passing objects. Cole couldn’t see the ceiling, or even the hand in front of his face. Once the guide angled his flashlight up and they saw cracked stone slithering by just above their heads. Cole held on to the reassuring bulk of Paige’s knee.

“You scared?” she said.

It wasn’t the way someone like Gregory would ask this, trying to make fun of him, so he felt okay saying, “A little.” But there was a trace of a laugh in Paige’s voice that he never heard in Mom’s. Mom would ask this question very seriously, as if she were scared too, as if she were looking for a reason to stop the ride, turn off the movie, stay home. Paige was more fun to be scared with.

“Up ahead!” cried the guide, skating his flashlight over the water. “The dragon’s eye! Can you see it?”

A column of light plunged into the lake through a big hole in the ceiling. They were going to sail right through the beam of his eye. Did that mean the dragon would see them? That he would know they had invaded his lair? Cole held his breath as the beam drew closer, casting a grainy glow over the walls on either side. He looked up when they passed under, straight into the eye of the dragon, but all he saw was blue sky daubed with a few clouds and fringed with leaves.

“Bet you could fish through that hole,” said Paige. “Catch some weird ones though, probably.”

“We are now approaching the dragon’s heart,” said the guide. “For your own safety, do not jump or lean out of the boat, but if you stand carefully, you will be able to touch the heart as we pass.” The beam of his flashlight zipped around the walls and ceiling, then froze, quivering.

“There!”

In the circle of light was a fat hunk of rock, hanging from the ceiling like the wobbly red thing in the back of people’s mouths. The dragon’s heart. Unlike most of the other rocks they’d

seen it looked shiny and wet, almost liquid. It bulged out in places in big, smooth curves. It didn't look like a rock at all. Cole could almost see it pulsing.

People were starting to stand up. "Are you gonna touch it?" Paige said.

"Yes." He could barely hear his own voice. He felt see-through, as if the dark had dissolved his body. The rock ballooned up before them; they didn't need the guide's flashlight to see it now. For a moment it looked as if the heart dipped too low and would rip all their heads off when they sailed under. But the closer they came, the more room there seemed to be. Paige had an idea.

"Get up on my back."

She turned in her seat with her back to him. Cole loved it when Paige picked him up, but it seemed different now, in the dark with the dragon's heart looming. "No, thanks."

"Come on, chicken."

"I am not chicken!" His voice came out loud and whiny; he hoped the big kid hadn't heard him.

"If you ain't chicken, then get up! Hurry."

He flew at her back, limbs wrapping tight, not caring if his grip hurt her. She shot up from her seat and braced her palms against his shoes until he could climb onto her shoulders. Instantly his anger disappeared in a rush of laughter. He was taller than the grownups reaching up into the air, way taller than the big kid, who was too cool to hold out his arms at all.

"Ma'am, y'all really shouldn't be doing that," Cole heard the guide say. But he didn't care. They were passing directly beneath the dragon's heart. Sounds of palms hitting rock

rebounded through the cave. He pressed both hands against the side of the heart. The cool, slippery sensation passed through his hands and trickled down to the tips of his toes. He kept his grip even when the boat continued to move and it felt for a moment as if he would slide back off Paige's shoulders and into the dark water.

Back above ground there was a little store where Paige bought them each a piece of rock candy. She made him wait until they were back on the bus to eat it. Her piece was green (emerald) and his was purple (amethyst).

"Don't chomp on it," Paige warned him. "You'll crack your teeth."

"I won't," he said, sliding the candy into his mouth. His mouth was a cave, wet and dark, with warm water pumping from vents beneath his tongue. The cave they had just left took a hundred thousand years to grow a stalactite. How long would his mouth take to destroy this stick of rock without biting down? However long it took, he would wait.

Paige would not understand any of this. She didn't have an imagination. She couldn't see the dragon in the cave; she couldn't tell that the stalactites were his teeth, the hole in the ceiling his eye. When they were alone together and he knew he could not share these thoughts with her, they would build up painfully inside him and he would miss Mom with a restless ache, though he knew she was only away at the office or, now, napping or reading in the mobile home. And yet there she was, while Paige was here with him.

"Mom's scared," he said.

"She's not scared," said Paige. "She's claustrophobic."

"That means scared of small spaces. The cave wasn't that small."

Paige sighed. “Mom’s been through scarier things than caves. Sometimes that makes things that ain’t that scary scarier.”

“You’re not scared,” he went on. He was trying to figure something out, but he didn’t know what. “You’re brave. Do I get that from you?”

She laughed; he didn’t know why. “You get it from both of us.”

*

The moment Paige opened the door of the mobile home, Cole knew something was wrong. The air inside felt uncertain, like when you woke up from a nap you didn’t mean to take and didn’t know if it was day or night. There was a strong, soaking smell. Mom sat upright on the couch with her head thrown back at the ceiling. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open. Some of her hair stuck to her face like cracks in an old painting. She never looked like that when she slept. Paige said a word he had never heard before and then Mom’s name again and again, shaking her shoulder.

“Go outside, boogieman,” Paige said. “Watch your step.”

A bottle of Crown Royal lay smashed at Mom’s feet, haloed by a dark puddle. Honey had parked himself on his side at the edge of it. Cole watched as the dog’s mouth opened and his tongue peeked out to brush the wetness, then slid back inside.

Leanne

Her mind scurried ahead of her brute body, tugging at the leash that bound them. She was either still half-asleep or still drunk, and would in either case have liked to steady herself with some of the instant coffee in the cabinet, but there was no time. She stumped out to the office

without putting on shoes; burrs stung her feet in a way that felt deserved. The old woman at the front desk slapped a hand to her chest when she saw Leanne coming.

“Is something wrong, honey?”

“May I see a phonebook, please?”

This failure of politeness seemed to convince the woman that whatever trouble Leanne was in was her own fault. She let her hand fall. “One moment, ma’am.”

Leanne dialed every veterinary office she could find. The first sent her to a meandering voicemail in which a molasses-voiced receptionist took ages to spit out the office hours, which they were currently outside. At the second she got only a dial tone. The third, the office of a Dr. Bell ten miles away, was open and taking new patients. “We’re real busy, though,” chirped the receptionist.

“That’s okay,” said Leanne. She glanced sidelong at the woman behind the desk. “Is there room in your lot for an RV?”

On the way, Honey fell into a drunken sleep from which she woke shivering and barking at nothing, having passed a puddle of runny, peanut-butter-colored shit. Dr. Bell’s lobby was packed as promised. The floor was a slick green linoleum that intensified Leanne’s headache; there was an astringent smell of flea medicine. She stared off at an oil painting of a field populated by a single proud specimen of various dog breeds. *Just one of each*, she thought. *It’s all mutts from here on out.* Honey sat vibrating on Paige’s lap, sandwiched between a rheumy-eyed dachshund and a tabby with one ear.

“Something must be going around,” said Cole. No one seemed to hear him.

Dr. Bell's sandy-haired receptionist, who was also his wife, led animals through a hallway one by one. Leanne began to feel that she was waiting for her own execution. She imagined Honey dying and it being her fault. She imagined Paige leaving her for it, and already she could hear her own incredulous response. *"You're going to leave me over a dog? That was half-dead anyway? You're going to leave my child over a dog."* Because there would be no heterosexual divorce—no joint custody, no visitations. It would all be over. She needed to call Beth and tell her they would be a day late, but she would not do this until she had calmed down and could put a breezy spin on things. *"We had to jettison the dog so that God would bless our voyage."* She would not mention the Crown Royal.

"How much did he have to drink?" asked Dr. Bell. "No judgment here; I'm no teetotaler, I'm just trying to get an idea."

Paige looked to Leanne; her mouth was a tight pucker. Leanne wanted to slap her. "I don't know," she said. "I wasn't exactly watching, or I would have stopped him."

The doctor shone a light into Honey's beady eyes. "I reckon there's no point in inducing emesis now, since y'all say he's already passed some of the poison. Honey should be all right—as all right as he was before, anyway—but we'll keep him under observation for a few days."

They could board him here until they came back through Georgia, but they had to sign a waiver allowing Dr. Bell to proceed with euthanasia if absolutely necessary. "He'll give y'all a call first, of course," said the receptionist. By the time they said goodbye to Honey, the sun was setting over the trees. Leanne sat up in the driving station with Paige. She put a hand on her knee.

"I'm sorry, baby," she said very softly.

Paige looked back into the living area, where Cole was scribbling in a coloring book.

“You don’t want him to hear you’re sorry?” she said.

*

In Asheville, it was Khaki who greeted them at the door. “Hello, travelers!” she called out in a singsong voice as she picked her way down the steep front steps; the house had been built into the side of a hill. From a distance she bore a passing resemblance to Carole King—a pleasant, finely lined face rendered shapeless by dark heavy curls.

“Beth does love her girly girls,” said Paige.

“What is that supposed to mean?” said Leanne.

“Not too much of a hike, was it?” asked Khaki. In fact, they’d walked a quarter mile, much of it uphill, from the gravel lot where Beth and Khaki parked their own mobile home. They shrugged politely. Khaki did not embrace or kiss them; she let her broad smile do the touching.

“Tell me, young man,” she said, bending toward Cole, “have you ever had crème brulee?”

“I don’t believe so,” Cole said. Leanne honestly couldn’t remember whether he’d had crème brulee—at a certain point you just couldn’t keep up with everything that went into your child’s body or mind—but in either case the question grated on her.

Soda frisked among their ankles in the entryway. Cole remembered him and called him by name. “Where’s Scotch?”

Khaki made a placeholder for a sad face. “We had to put Scotch down. We’re a dry household now.”

At Khaki's urging they removed their shoes and followed her into the front room.

"Hello, hello!" squawked Moses.

Cole looked around and gasped.

"This *whole* place is made of wood!"

"Did you design it, bud?" said Paige.

"He's right, though." Khaki smiled at Cole. "Most of it oak and ash. Our own little treehouse."

Little was one word for it. The palatial front room, walled in glass on the mountain-facing side, rose to a cathedral ceiling with a skylight. Directly beneath it lay a queen-size spread of pillows and quilts.

"Cole, we set up your pallet here so you can look up at the stars," said Khaki.

"Hey, ho!" came a boisterous voice from another room. Beth stepped out from the kitchen looking hearty with heat, her glasses misted, her face and neck flushed. "Stew's about ready," she announced. "Don't have to hug me, I'm sweating like a pig." She gripped Leanne's hands at arms' length; they kissed the air a full foot from one another's cheeks. "Hey there, Paige," she said, giving Paige a more natural knead on the shoulder. All this seemed to have been onerous ceremony for Beth when she hunched to her knees and beamed at Cole. "Hey, little man! You remember your Aunt Beth?"

"Of course I do!" said the boy and put his hands around her sweaty neck. It occurred to Leanne that he could be lying—already, at six, Cole was frighteningly attuned to the laws of

politeness and would never admit to forgetting a grownup. Then again, maybe he'd remembered and missed Beth all this time and had been too polite to say anything about it.

Beth nodded to the cup in Paige's hand. "Still doing your Crown with Diet Coke, huh? Isn't that something? Come on, let me get you a refresher. Leanne, whiskey?"

"White wine, if you have it." She was privately relieved the *dry household* comment had only been a joke.

"I'll have a gin and tonic," said Cole as they moved toward the kitchen. Khaki laughed breathily. "That boy is not right," said Paige.

"You've been making that joke a lot lately," Leanne said to Cole in a low voice. "Jokes aren't as funny if you've heard them before."

"They haven't heard it," he said and looked at her strangely. He took a few galloping steps to get ahead of her.

"This beats the heck out of Vienna sausages," Paige said of Beth's venison stew. Leanne winced; when Paige said it, *Vienna* rhymed with *hyena*.

Khaki was from lower Maryland, where people who considered it Southern apparently took great pains to mention it. "Oh, come off it, sweetie. You practically grew up on the National Mall," said Beth, not without warmth. "Her dad was a Senator."

Which side of the aisle? Leanne wondered, but said nothing.

"Still with the A.G.'s office?" Beth asked her.

"Thirteen years now." Leanne smiled. "Still ripping children from their parents?"

Beth laughed. "There have been a lot of custody battles. And how about you, Paige? Are you still hiking up telephone poles?"

Paige winced. "Busted my knee to hell about a year ago. Now I just answer the phones."

Leanne rubbed Paige's knee under the table, unsure suddenly if she was touching the right one, the one busted to hell.

"This is delicious," announced Cole. "I've never had venison before."

Beth and Khaki beamed. Leanne was in awe. One hour in this place and he'd learned exactly how to flatter them. They were eating right out of his hand.

"Little man, what grade are you in now?" said Beth.

"I'm not in any grade," said Cole. "It's vacation. But next year I'll be in second."

"Second grade," Khaki said slowly, as if it were Morocco.

"Do you like St. Cecilia's?" said Beth.

"I love it! In first grade we went to the zoo, and made volcanoes, and on the hundredth day of school we dressed up like we were a hundred."

Beth chuckled. "That's good. And you're getting to do everything you want to do?"

Cole did not seem to understand the question. He furrowed his brow, which always struck adults as a sign of precocity, though Leanne knew it meant he was stalling. "You're gonna start piano lessons in the fall, aren't you, sweetie?" she said.

He looked at her, grateful for the help. "That's right!"

“I thought maybe he’d wanna do karate,” said Paige. “A lot of the other boys are doing it.”

“Let the other boys do karate,” said Khaki, winking at Cole. “You’ll come back next year and play us some Beethoven.”

Paige

“I was born in the wrong century,” Leanne was saying. She said this a lot, said it about Cole too, whenever they came back from the art museum in Jackson with a bagful of magnets and figurines, or sat down to watch *Rick Steves Europe*. She never said it about Paige; she seemed to think the century Paige had been born in was just right.

This time she was saying it about her weight. Her arms *did* look a little round in that jean dress with no sleeves, but Paige knew she wasn’t interested in doing anything about it—wouldn’t dream of coming with her to the golf course sometime—except making jokes.

“I always tell Paige, Rubens would’ve loved me,” Leanne said.

“You sure do.” Paige nodded across the table; she might have left it at that, but she didn’t. “And she knows damn well I don’t know who Rubens is. I swear, sometimes it’s like she’s talking past me to some smarter person only she can see.”

She felt a sudden, sharp explosion against her shin.

“You kicked me.” She looked to Beth and Khaki, openmouthed. “She kicked me.”

For a moment Leanne looked trapped, but then she broke out into her ridiculous, chiming laugh that always seemed to come at the most inappropriate times, yet was weirdly infectious.

“Sweetheart?” she said to Cole across the table.

Cole looked at her very seriously. “Yes?”

“A quick lesson for you. If someone ever kicks you under a table, it’s supposed to be a private signal for you to change the subject. What you don’t want to do is tell the whole table that someone just kicked you. Got it?”

“Got it,” he said.

Khaki looked at Beth, who stood up from her seat. “I think I smell dessert. Cole, would you give me a hand?”

Cole

He wasn’t sure why he felt so thrilled to be alone in the kitchen with Beth—it must be that she had what Mom called a *good aura*. She arranged five small cups filled with something light and smooth along the counter and began to cover them evenly with sugar from a bag. Then she opened a drawer and pulled out something that looked like a gun. “This is where I need your help. Push this button here.”

A blue flame erupted from the tip of the gun. Cole shuddered at this unexpected power he now commanded. The gun felt heavy. Beth moved behind him and placed both her hands over his. He smelled creamy soap and her strong, sweet breath. Her hands moved the flame high over the first cup in quick, licking motions.

“I shouldn’t stand so close,” she said. “My breath might ignite.”

“Are you part dragon?” he asked.

She squeezed her hands tight around his. “I’m all dragon.”

The sugar went up in angry bubbles, then turned the color of the amber in which he’d seen prehistoric mosquitos trapped. “Okay, you can let go of the button now.” Setting the gun down, she tilted the cup toward their faces; the light slid over the burnt sugar like glass.

“Isn’t that pretty?” said Beth. “Now whenever you have this you can think of me.”

When they entered with dessert, the table had been abandoned. Paige stood near Moses’ cage in the front room, hunched over and cursing lowly. Khaki kept trying to pry open Paige’s fist, from which Cole could see a squiggle of blood escaping. Mom stood off to one side, laughing uncontrollably.

“What happened here?” said Beth.

“She was trying to say hello to Moses,” said Khaki.

“She stuck her finger right through the cage,” said Mom. “What did you think he was gonna do, shake your hand?”

“You’re gonna think it’s real funny when I can’t drive us home. Let’s see you try to park the mobile home.”

“It’s just your fingertip,” said Khaki, who had managed to open Paige’s hand. “Though it might need a butterfly bandage. Let’s go to the medicine cabinet.”

Cole looked at the blood and listened to Mom laughing. He couldn’t tell which of the two was making his stomach feel tight, but he sided with the blood. “Can I come?” he asked.

Khaki looked to Beth. “Well, sure. We had cooking class, now it’s first aid.” He followed them gratefully out of the room. “Goodbye, goodbye!” Moses chanted.

Leanne

“Are you satisfied?” she asked Beth when she was able to stop laughing.

Beth cracked open a crème brulee with a spoon. “These are getting cold; you should have one. Am I satisfied with what?”

“With how I’ve been raising my son since you tried to save him from me. You haven’t seemed terribly interested in keeping in touch.”

Beth peeled the entire pane of burnt sugar off the cup and ate it whole. “Goddammit, Leanne. I never wanted to steal Cole from you.”

“What did you want, then?”

Beth blinked at her. “You really don’t remember, do you? I guess I’m not surprised. You were in a bad way then. Not that I was very subtle about it.”

“What are you suggesting? That you wanted to *be* with me?”

“What else could I have done? I moved you in with me—”

“While you fired my contractors and fixed up my house yourself.”

“I thought you could sell it!”

“And move in with you?”

“What business did you have living out there alone in the country anyway?”

“None of your damn business, that’s what. Why did you set me up with somebody then, if you were so besotted with me?”

Beth laughed acidly. “Come on, Leanne. We both know you need someone to take care of you. Claire did beautifully. You two were superheroes together; we were all in awe of you. And then you had a child! None of us were doing that then. But when she died, we all knew you needed somebody. The vultures started circling immediately.”

“What vultures?”

“Those *friends* you had doting on you?” She began to call out their names on her fingers, women Leanne hadn’t heard from in years. “You didn’t see it, but they were having a field day. Raiding your medicine cabinet, rummaging through your silver. They would have left with half your shit if I hadn’t been there to send them packing.”

“And if you couldn’t ‘take care of me—”

“I thought Paige could make you happy for a while. Not necessarily as a *life partner*, but someone to help you and Cole get back on your feet.”

“You seem to be the real authority on whether I am on or off my feet.”

“Well, was I wrong? Cole’s turning out to be a wonderful kid—”

“Nothing to do with me, I’m sure.”

“And you seem to be doing...quite well, yourself. I don’t know why you’re so offended, Leanne. Do you really mean to tell me you plan on being with Paige forever?”

Leanne might have lied, if only to rescue some shred of ego, had her phone not started to ring. She flipped it open. It was a Georgia area code.

“Paige!” she called out. “Can you come in here?”

At once they were all standing around her—Khaki, Cole, Beth, Paige, her hand mummified in gauze—as if she were someone in a play with a secret.

“It’s Dr. Bell,” she said, “calling about Honey.” Paige’s face blanched. Leanne put the phone back to her ear and listened. “Oh no,” she said. “I see. Thank you.” She hung up.

“Honey went into convulsions at Dr. Bell’s tonight,” she said. “They don’t know what caused it, but he threw up his dinner and then ate it. Now he’s fine. They don’t know why, but he’s fine now. Everything’s fine.”

All We Ever Talk About

My friend Rex was talking. Rex had just gotten back from a trip abroad, so we were happy to indulge him.

The four of us were sitting in a booth at Magnolia Café drinking coffee. The café's sign, a band of pink neon bent into cursive, read backward to us in the window, framed by a night that looked depthless, painted on. There were Rex and me and Rex's roommate Jose and my roommate Clark. We lived in Austin then. None of us were dating each other but almost all of us had fucked.

Amidst us was a bowl of what the café called "Mag Mud"—queso heaped with guacamole and black beans, sucking up our chips like a tar pit. The host kept coming around to refill our coffees, and somehow we got on the subject of shame.

Rex framed the discussion by distinguishing shame from guilt. He'd been raised Catholic and, despite having renounced the Church years ago, often found theology helpful to apply in conversation.

"Guilt," he said, "is the knowledge that you've done something bad. Shame is thinking *you* are bad, fundamentally."

Rex was twenty-five. He had a small, compact body and acorn-colored hair in a boyish mop that worked for him somehow.

"Religion is all about shame," said Clark, piercing the Mag Mud with his chip. Clark was twenty-six and, like me, had moved here from Mississippi. Objectively I found his shaved head

and inked arms sexy, but the way I felt for him was ultimately familial. “If you’re not perfect, which no one is, then you’re defective and you’re going to hell.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s quite that simple,” said Rex. He hated the Church as much as anyone but had been too intimate with its tics and mannerisms, like those of a toxic relative, to hear it profaned by others.

“I don’t think it’s possible to grow up as a queer person without some amount of shame,” I said.

“I kinda love shame,” said Jose with a rascally shrug. “Knowing all your life that what you like is taboo, transgressive, it’s a gift straight people will never have.”

Jose was twenty-one and had only recently come out. He had a cleft chin he’d always compulsively hidden, but as more and more guys told him they liked it, he’d started holding it higher, angling it for photos.

“No matter how much better things get for us,” said Jose, “I never want to lose my little flicker of shame.”

*

Rex had been in Rome, which for Catholics, even lapsed ones, was basically Disneyland. He’d taken a six-week creative writing workshop at an American university. We asked him the obvious question first.

“I had sex twice while I was there,” he said. “One time I felt ashamed and one time I didn’t.”

“Is this all we ever talk about?” said Clark.

“Clark, sometimes,” said Rex.

Clark made a permissive gesture with his hand and nipped sullenly at his coffee. He hadn’t been able to bottom since he’d had surgery that spring for polyps in his colon, and the restriction had made him a tad bitter. When I separated our mail I flipped the bills from the colorectal clinic facedown to pretend I hadn’t seen the address.

“Go on, babe,” I said.

Rex said, “The first time was with this couple. I—”

“Were they Italian?” Jose said.

“No, they were British. And the other time was with this one guy.”

“Was he Italian?” I said.

“No,” said Rex. “He was American.” We nodded into our coffees, trying to put a gloss on our disappointment.

“Anyway,” Rex said. “I met the couple on Grindr and they invited me over to the condo they were renting in Trastevere. I was staying in the same *rione*, so I walked over. It’s a medieval neighborhood, but very trendy with tourists. Few actual Romans live there, but they put up foreign students like myself in these cramped little stucco apartments so we can feel like we’re getting the authentic Roman experience. The streets are winding cobblestone, and they morph into other streets without warning. Built that way to confuse Vandals, I suppose, but now all they confuse are drunk American students.”

“How would that stop vandalism?” Clark said.

“Vandals with a capital V,” said Jose. “You know. Invaders.”

“Anyway, these are all the wrong details,” I said.

Rex looked stung. “I’m telling you about my trip.”

“He knows we’ll listen to get to the sex,” said Jose. “The sex is a vehicle.”

“Vehicle with a capital V,” Clark said. The rest of us looked down at the schnauzer-patterned laminate on the counter.

“Anyway,” said Rex. “It took me forever to find the place. When I did find it, it seemed to have materialized in a spot I’d walked by earlier, like the city had watched me flit around for half an hour and had decided to reward my efforts. I felt embarrassed, relieved, and still keyed up from the fear of being lost. It’s a cocktail of emotions I’ve come to really enjoy.

“They answered the door together. Neither of them was particularly handsome, but the shorter one, a redhead, had a mischievous look about him, a glint in his eyes that excited me. The taller one was gray-eyed and long in the face, with receding black hair. He had this quiet, stony energy that seemed to contain his husband’s.

““Come in out of the cold,”” said the tall one, though it was June and probably seventy degrees.

“It looked just like a suite at any Hilton, except there were framed photos of the Trevi Fountain and the Spanish Steps for context. I sat between them on the sofa and opened an art

book to a detail of Bernini's *Rape of Persephone*. You know: Hades' fingers sinking into Persephone's marble thigh.

"I'm going to see this tomorrow,' I said. 'At the Villa Borghese.' They leaned in toward me, pretending to study the photo. The redhead looked at the title. 'Why go all that way? We can rape you right here,' he said. He slipped his hand into my lap, under the book, and squeezed.

"It seemed important that we talk first. I asked what they were doing in Rome. Honeymoon. Florence on Monday, then the Amalfi Coast. I mentioned everything English I could think of, which amounted to Brexit headlines and *Absolutely Fabulous*.

"A silence pressed down on us. I shut the book and replaced it on the coffee table. Then the tall one said, "'You should start taking off your clothes.'"

Jose and I flopped back in our seats and let out identical played-up groans of desire: Rex had relayed this last line in an Oxford accent. Clark listened with a fixed stare.

"So I took everything off," Rex said, "there on the sofa. The whole time they both just sat there and watched. Neither of them moved to help me take off my shirt or my shorts, or to take off what they were wearing. They were both barefoot but had on sweaters and fitted jeans. They looked like they were going somewhere. I leaned toward the redhead, because let's face it, he was cuter, and tried to kiss him, but he pulled back and shook his head with this kind of mean look on his face. Without looking away from me he popped open the button-fly of his jeans and shimmied them around his thighs. His husband's hand clamped my head from behind and pushed me down.

“I held my head in place while the redhead jacked his hips into me. Behind me I felt the tall one hook his hands around my hips and tug them toward him. I shuffled my legs apart. I heard him spit and felt it land. The pad of his thumb circled my ass, then an index finger sank in. The middle went in right after. Before I knew what was happening I could feel knuckles pressing into my tailbone. Then the tip of his ring finger squeezed into place beside the knuckles of the other two. My hips started to shake, but he held them still with his other hand.

“‘You can take it,’” he said. There was no warmth in his voice; this was simply a statement of fact. I could feel his ragged nails. I wondered if he bit them. His wedding ring sank into me, hard but not cold like you might think. For a second I thought I could taste the metal.

“My muscles bound his three fingers into one. They twisted in and out of me in a corkscrewing motion, keeping time with the redhead swinging in and out of my mouth. Then they twisted out and didn’t come back. That hand came around to clamp my other hip. I heard him rise up on his knees.

“‘Can I fuck him?’” he said over the length of my back.

“We hadn’t discussed penetration, even with fingers. ‘We only fuck each other,’ the redhead, who manned their profile, had said.

“For a moment all three of us held still. I could hear everyone’s heart. I could hear them looking at one another. I was a piece of furniture they were deciding over. Then the redhead must have nodded, because I felt a broad, blunt pressure against my ass. I yelped. With my mouth blocked, the noise seemed to diffuse throughout my body, a sound only I could hear.

“You hear a lot about out-of-body-experiences,” Rex said. “A feeling is so intense you go outside yourself. But I didn’t go outside my body when he fucked me. I wasn’t *in* my body, either. I just *was* my body. There was no separation. I felt I could see up along all my veins and out of my fingers and toes. I *was* my body. That’s all I was.”

We all looked at Rex.

“Do you see what I’m saying?” he said.

*

“I see what you’re saying,” said Clark. “You’re saying you were raped.”

Rex thought about this for a moment. “Maybe,” he said. “I never said he could fuck me. He didn’t ask *me* if he could fuck me. But it was hot that he asked his husband and not me. He talked about me like I wasn’t even there.”

Clark made a show of pulling his spoon out of his coffee cup, clinking it on the edge, and setting it down on a napkin. “Girl, if that’s hot, you can have it.”

“Would it have been better if I’d hated it?” Rex said. “It happened either way.”

“Did he wear a condom at least?” Jose said. Jose and Rex were two of us who had fucked. Clark and I weren’t sure if they still did. Truvada was still in preliminary trials that year.

Rex shrugged and looked at Clark. He seemed to have decided to match Clark’s escalating frustration with escalating nonchalance. “Honestly I don’t know,” he said. “I didn’t see. It didn’t feel like he did though.”

The host came around and topped off our coffees, silently imputing into each mug the thought that we should order some real food or get the hell out.

Rex pitched forward in his seat and wrapped his hands around his hot mug. “Look, I’m not saying it was right,” he said. “Or that it would’ve been hot for anyone. But it was hot for me, all right? Will you give me that?”

Clark spread his hands in a gesture of magnanimity. “I can’t deny you anything, sweetie,” he said. “You do you.”

“Fine,” said Rex. “I was raped. Okay? I was raped and I liked it. Are you happy?”

Clark studied his coffee as if it were poison. He said, “No; I’m not. Because you don’t mean it. You’re glamorizing it with this story you’re telling, and that’s what ends up making it seem okay for us to do these things to each other. It’s why so many of us have no self-respect, so we’ll let people do whatever they want to us and we’ll do whatever we want to them. Because we’re men, right? That’s just how we are.”

Rex craned his head back and blinked as if Clark were an object out of focus. Then he looked at Jose and me.

“Let’s poll the audience,” he said. “Do you ladies think I’m glamorizing?”

Jose raised an eyebrow at me in a way that said he was not going to field this one. I picked my words carefully. Clark was my roommate, and soon I’d be alone with him and his version of events on the car ride home. But Rex was my friend too.

“I think Rex is sharing his experience,” I said. “And he’s entitled to his feelings about that experience.” I paused. “But Clark is entitled to his feelings about that experience, too,” I

said, “because Clark, and probably everyone else at this table, has had some version of it himself.”

“That’s very diplomatic, sweetie,” said Rex. That was my role then in the group. I was capable of summarizing conflicts so equitably I rarely found myself at the center of them.

“So that was the time you didn’t feel ashamed,” said Jose. “When did you?”

“Oh,” said Rex. “The American. He walked to my place all the way from the Pantheon, at high noon. He was perfectly sweet, he just smelled terrible. I couldn’t stand to eat onions for the rest of the trip.”

Rex kept talking, but I was no longer listening. I was thinking of all the stories of my own I could have told when I had been given the chance to speak. The one about the closeted Marine back in Mississippi who fucked me in his truck when I was fifteen and lied that I was seventeen, who leaned down into my face and said, “I’d have fucked you if you were twelve.” The one about the guy I offered a blowjob who insisted on fucking me instead, who prodded my ass with the tip of his cock until I stopped saying, “No,” and instead said, “Just do it.” Or the one about the beautiful, drunk boy on a camping trip whom I’d found near-unconscious on a golf cart and longed to touch, and the fact that I hadn’t gave me no peace from the fact that I could have.

The host set our check on the table, but no one moved to take it. No one spoke. My friends’ eyes were harder to meet now because of what I saw. I saw nothing less than what we had done with our bodies, what had been done to them, and what we were yet capable of.

after Raymond Carver

Chopsticks

The Gold Lotus isn't one of our favorite places. Mom and I only stopped here after seeing my pediatrician in the same strip mall, so many times that I can never drink egg drop soup without tasting mucus. But Mom's intensive outpatient group also meets in this building. Jim drops her off each morning on his way to work, and one of the women in the group gives her a lift home. She does not mention her limited mobility over the phone. "Why don't you meet me at the Gold Lotus?" she says, as if recalling the place warmly. "We haven't been there in a while."

I left Oxford when it was still dark and drove to Jackson without stopping. After lunch I will drive straight back. Frida, my AA sponsor, suggested a short trip would be best, to say what I need to say and be gone.

A hostess in a rayon kimono motions me to a booth. Cracked gallon pails are lined up behind it. The lid is off one, exposing a rag afloat in bleach. I order water and sweet tea. They come in red-dyed plastic cups that obscure the color of their contents. I take a sip from one, taste the bland super-sweetness of the tea. I switch between tea and water until both are half-empty. A waitress arrives with a pitcher of each in hand.

"You don't want to get some food?" she asks, refilling. It does seem silly to wait at a place like this, designed for unbridled self-service.

"I'll wait for my company," I say. She smiles as if she doesn't believe me, and I start to wonder if I am being stood up. For once this seems out of the question. Mom sounded stable on the phone this morning, just before Jim dropped her off, and I know she's right around the corner. She has a car, but her license has been revoked. The potential for flight or sabotage is slim. Still, I feel a familiar drift in my gut as the minutes pass. My booth untethers itself from the

room, the steaming vats and tong-wielding diners slide back, the gold cat by the register pumps me a cheery farewell. Mom said a friend from her group would be joining us. I look around for an unattended woman in her fifties or sixties. My one prospect, a lady with orange, singed-looking hair, joins a balding man and a teenage girl at the booth across from me. I call Mom's cell twice in five minutes; both times I am told her mailbox is full. I call Frida.

"What if she doesn't show?"

"She might not," Frida says. I can hear her shrugging. Her receptivity to disappointment, honed through two decades of sobriety, can be mistaken for apathy.

"I came all the way down here," I say, picking at the loose binding of my notebook.

"And you'll have done your part," she says. "Regardless. There's value in that."

It takes me a moment to recognize Mom. She looks healthier, but also paler, more fragile. Her auburn hair, bunched into unwashed tangles the last time I saw her, has been thinned out and trimmed just below her earlobes. The skin of her face settles over the bones like a fresh sheet where the inflammation has gone down. Her eyes flick about the restaurant; her anxiety flutters the surface of panic. I am almost ashamed to see this, and am grateful when she sees me waving.

"Hi sweetie," she says, so softly I have to read her lips. She steps toward me with her hands outstretched, as if a minor earthquake is taking place. I take three long strides to meet her. Her hand clamps onto mine. Is this affection, or need of balance?

"Don't be alarmed by my walk," she says. "I'm doing much better, but I'm only a week out of a wheelchair."

"You're doing great," I say, steering us toward the booth.

“Thessaly should be right behind me. Her parents named her Thessaly. Can you believe that? Poor thing; it’s not her fault. I think you’ll like her.”

The waitress appears at her shoulder. Mom looks startled for a moment, then orders water with lemon.

“You don’t mind that I invited her, do you?”

“Of course not.”

In fact, I did try to work out this development on the drive down. Was she afraid to be alone with me? Did she sense the purpose for my visit and wish to thwart it? Had she told this friend unflattering things about me in their group? Would my behavior at lunch elicit glances of recognition and confirmation between them? I revise my sketch of this friend. Anyone named Thessaly must be about my age. This sets up a fresh reel of questions.

“It’s so good to see you,” says Mom, shooting out her hand to clasp mine again.

“It’s good to see you too,” I say. It’s true, though already I feel something other than the drive pulling the energy out of my bones.

“And don’t worry about my hair, either,” she says. “You remember what a rat’s nest it was. They couldn’t do anything with it at the hospital. It’ll grow back.”

“I don’t care,” I say, forcing a laugh. “I’m just happy to see you.”

“Me too.” She smiles and settles back in her booth, pleased that we have dispensed with her list of insecurities. The notebook sticks in my peripheral vision.

“We don’t have to do this right now,” I say, “but there are a couple things I’d like to say to you while we’re together.”

In Oxford I have learned to chart the rhythms of her illness from afar. The slurred Sunday-afternoon phone calls I leave on speaker while I work on a paper or laundry, mechanically responding to yes-or-no questions, before excusing myself to do what I have been doing already. The nighttime calls I know not to answer, though I can’t help but listen to the voicemails that follow, her voice reedy with indignation. “This is your *mother*,” she says, thrusting the word at me like a gift I have rejected. The silences that pass in institutional lengths. Thirty days. Sixty days. Ninety. If Christmas or my birthday falls within this hiatus I will receive an envelope with the return address of a treatment facility, containing some cash and a long letter, sometimes ten pages, the thoughts wistful and calm, the handwriting wild as torn roots.

This time, though, the calls haven’t stopped.

“It’s like she’s actually getting better this time,” I told Frida while we shared a cigarette on church steps after a meeting.

She took the cigarette from me, and in a dry, Socratic tone said, “Think this might be a good time to make your amends?”

Mom’s eyes move to the door. “There she is.”

Thessaly spots Mom from the doorway and steps toward us. She’s tall, and a little older than me, probably twenty-six or twenty-seven. Her hair hangs in a heavy brown bob around a face that reminds me of a sugar cookie cut from dough rolled out too thin. A shapeless, sashed plaid garment runs from her collar to her ankles, a kimono by way of Glasgow.

“Dr. Shen kept me late,” she tells Mom, “to adjust my meds.” She turns to me. “Hi! I’m Thessaly. Your mom’s told me so much about you.”

Her smile twitches as she tastes the age-inappropriateness of her words. I wish I could say Mom has told me *so much* about her, or anything at all. “Nice to meet you,” I say. The waitress reappears. Thessaly orders Coke Zero, then, when the waitress’ brow furrows, hastily amends to Diet Coke.

“I’m trying not to blow up again,” she explains to us, pinching the indeterminate shape of her middle through the plaid. “First it’s opiates, then it’s refined sugar.”

“Don’t forget MSG,” Mom adds.

“Are you from Jackson originally?” I ask Thessaly as we push toward the buffet.

“Not originally, no. I went to college in South Carolina, to study art.” She blows a short raspberry to punctuate this life decision. “I came here for treatment, then stayed to take some art classes.” She stops and looks around with quick jerks of her head, like an owl. “Where’s your mom?”

Mom is still in her booth. Her brow wilts with concentration. Her palms brace against her knees, then the table, neither hold achieving any propulsion. An airlock opens in my gut. I sidestep Thessaly to help her up.

“Thank you, sweetie,” Mom says, clamping my hand again. “Don’t worry. Your mother’s not an invalid just yet.”

Thessaly chuckles at this.

We orbit the vats in single file, Thessaly in front, I close behind Mom in case she stumbles. My stomach has been empty since the Honey Bun and coffee I swallowed on the road, but it shrivels in complaint at the lo mein lying in warm intestinal coils, the sesame chicken's roadkill look of slow expiration of will. My mother looks helpless in this steamy atmosphere. I want to zip a jumpsuit up her back, shove a helmet over her lopped curls, and blast us home. Not to Jim's bungalow in Jackson to which I will return her when we finish here, a place that, despite the four years we both lived there, never felt like a home. I'm thinking of our old house in the country, where at night we bedded down beneath her own grandmother's quilt and she read me Swedish picture books about children who run away from home and are subjected to the magical torments of nature. When she'd finished, I clutched her nightgown to me and listened to nature speak beyond the porch: the wind's leafy feedback, the strophe and antistrophe of bullfrogs and cicadas, the plaints of chained dogs carrying across the lake. Nature did eventually invade. We began to spend more time at Jim's. The house grew shaggy and unloved. Bills mounted as Mom's drinking accelerated. Power and water were severed. The last time I drove by, the gate to the garage was chained and padlocked. A pine limb shoved through my bedroom window, as if to snatch my eight-year-old self from bed. A sign staked in the front yard bore a bank's insignia. I wanted to get out of my car, stand in the yard, and shoot out the windows like Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway.

Thessaly beats us to the booth. Food untouched, she sits hunched over her phone, typing frantically with one finger. I imagine an accomplice stationed in a parked car around the corner, Thessaly informing him that she has befriended the old lady and is just a few questions away from learning the location of her valuables, provided the son doesn't cause trouble. She flips the phone facedown on the table when she sees us. Mom lowers herself slowly back into the booth.

Her plate looks selected by a dietitian, judicious helpings of starch, protein, vegetables: the plate of someone who has had to relearn food. She slides a packet of chopsticks toward me. “I thought you might like to use these,” she says. “More authentic.”

“Thanks,” I say, laughing, “but it’s not like the food is any more authentic than the forks.”

Her face sinks a little. “I know. I just thought you might...” She trails off. So often with my mother, I feel she has slipped something impossibly delicate under my foot—an endangered bird’s egg, an origami heart—so I have no time to stop myself before I step down and crush it.

“Thank you,” I say again, “that was very thoughtful.” But I keep using my fork.

“How do you like Dr. Shen?” Thessaly asks Mom, curling confidentially toward her.

Mom frowns, considers the potential for controversy. “I like him all right,” she says.

Thessaly bobs her head. “Me too,” she says. “I just don’t get why he won’t prescribe me any *amphetamines*.” She hisses this last word, as if some amphetamines nearby might hear her.

“That is weird, isn’t it?” says Mom. “Then again, I’m not sure how I feel about amphetamines myself.”

“Maybe because they’re habit-forming,” I say.

They look up at me as if they’d forgotten I was here.

“I have to tell you,” Mom says to me, with a quaver either of confession or indignation, “I’m taking something to help me sleep. My—our—doctor prescribed it for me. It’s not a narcotic, and it’s really helping.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” says Thessaly, cutting me off. “My new meds are helping too. I used to be on nine things; now I’m only on six.”

“That’s wonderful, sweetie.” Mom pats her on the shoulder, then looks at me as if I might flip over the table.

“I’m sorry,” Thessaly says to me. “All this drug talk must be boring you.”

I shrug. “Not at all. I’ve been sober for two years.”

Her eyes grow large. “Wow. That’s amazing.”

“It is,” says Mom, winking at me. “I’m very proud of him.”

“Makes my six weeks look like...” She glances at her plate. “Chop suey.”

Mom turns to her, suddenly fiery. “Six weeks is nothing to scoff at,” she says. “The first thirty days are the hardest.” She turns to me, eyes flashing. “Don’t you agree, sweetie?”

“Right,” I say.

“Shen was all cool with me being on Adderall back when I was taking classes,” says Thessaly, “but now that I’m taking a semester off, he says I don’t need it anymore.” She rolls her eyes.

“I abused Adderall all through college,” I say, unable to help myself. “I crushed it up and snorted it before class every morning. One time my nose bled all over a Scantron and the machine couldn’t score it.”

Thessaly makes the motion of smoothing behind her ear an already smoothed-back strand of hair.

“But you didn’t need it,” Mom says gently. “You didn’t have ADHD.”

I grind the side of my fork into a piece of chicken.

“So,” says Thessaly, “your mom tells me you’re in school for—oh crap—” I watch her lash the stalled, fly-bitten mule of her memory. “Philosophy.”

“Religious studies.”

“Right, right, I knew that. Sorry!” She raps her temple with the knuckles of one hand.

“He’s writing his thesis,” says Mom.

“Neat. What’s it on?”

“My research is on conversion narratives.” As I roll out my well-worn intro, I am aware, without being able to stop, that I have begun to nod steadily, keeping time with the cat at the register, a tic I suspect will hound me into academia. “I’m looking at the lives of people considered saints, both in religious and secular traditions. I have a chapter on St. Mary of Egypt, the insatiable prostitute who spent forty-seven years of penance in the desert. There’s also a chapter on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I’m interested in how these figures change their moral codes—prostitutes become ascetics, hustlers become Muslim firebrands—but retain the qualities that defined them in their past lives: their extremism, their passion, their resourcefulness. Basically, my thesis is that, while people may translate the sentence of their lives into a new language”—I lift this phrase directly from the introduction to my manuscript, I have no shame at all—“they don’t, fundamentally, change.”

The air is humid, but Mom shivers. “That’s a pretty scary thought, sweetie.”

“How interesting,” says Thessaly. “I happen to think people change all the time.” She laughs and tosses her head, stuffing her dissent in a bright Easter grass of agreeableness.

“I really am doing better,” Mom says to me. “I’m not letting people push me around. The other day, in group, I was sharing about something very personal, something that happened to me in college. You know what I’m talking about.”

I nod quickly, looking at my plate. I can never look directly at her when she talks about her abduction. The first time she told me I was eight. She climbed into bed beside me, clammy and trembling. Her heartbeat ricocheted in the room like the beam from a flashlight.

“I had a nightmare,” she said, holding me, “about something that really happened. You need to know about it because it almost meant that I wouldn’t be here now, and that means neither would you.”

Her sweat was sugary with white wine. Strands of her hair stuck to my neck like spiders’ legs. As she told me I lay very still and pretended to sleep, though my limbs ached with the urge to thrash, kick, to plug my ears and shove her out of the bed. Her nightgown bandaged itself to my back.

In the morning she looked worn and embarrassed. She smiled thinly at me over our plates of bagels and peanut butter. I cut my eyes down to my plate and didn’t speak to her for the rest of the day.

This was before she met Jim, when it was just us.

“Anyway,” she says now, “these two girls were talking the whole time I was sharing. Eventually I stopped and said to the moderator, ‘I feel disrespected.’ She said, ‘Don’t tell me; tell them.’ So I turned to them and said, ‘I feel disrespected.’ They apologized, of course; they had to. But do you know what I said? I said, ‘I accept your apology.’ I didn’t say, ‘That’s all right,’ or, ‘I know you didn’t mean it.’ Because it wasn’t all right. I stood my ground.” She gives me a triumphant look. “Now, that doesn’t sound much like your mother, does it?”

“I’m very happy for you,” I say.

Thessaly cocks her head. “I don’t remember that.”

“You were having a one-on-one with Dr. Shen,” says Mom.

“Was it Kris and Jackie?” she says. “Those dicks.”

Mom takes a cavalier stab at a piece of broccoli. “It’s all right. I only brought it up to brag on myself.”

But her interest has not been sated. “Something that happened to you in college?”

Mom bites slowly into the broccoli. “Yes.” She glances at me. “I didn’t mean to bring that up. We don’t have to talk about it.”

“That’s okay. You can talk about it.” Thessaly looks at me, as if to recruit me to her fascination. She scratches the back of her neck. “You know, if you want to.”

I want to shove her head into her soup bowl and watch her blow bubbles.

Mom grips the edge of the table. She speaks with a forced steadiness; her words walk a plank. “I was a freshman. I lived in the dorms. One night I was getting out of my car, and...”

I want to intervene, but all I can do is stare at the lone broccoli floret left on her plate. Then I hear myself make a noise: it sounds like, “Ummmmm...” There is no thought behind it, but it does the job. Mom stops speaking; they both look at me. I clear my throat. “Who’s ready for seconds?”

I load my second plate with food I have no intention of eating. When we regroup, Thessaly says to Mom, “Tell him how much better you’re doing with Jim.”

Mom gives me a bashful grin. “Jim got a DUI, you know,” she says.

I strip my face of expression before I answer. “Did he?”

“He had to install a Breathalyzer in his car,” she says. “He rages about it constantly, but I don’t put up with his tirades the way I used to. I call Thessaly, or one of the other girls, and I go to a meeting.”

“Is he still waking you up at night?” says Thessaly.

She answers at me. “I’m in bed by ten. He gets home at two or three in the morning, grumbling, knocking things over. He comes into the bedroom stinking of whiskey. Last night, when he woke me up, he said, ‘I’m sorry I make you so anxious.’ So I said, ‘You can’t make me anxious. You don’t have that power over me.’”

“What about the Breathalyzer?” I say. “How does he get home?”

She winces. “He takes my car.”

“You’re doing great,” says Thessaly. “Keep showing him you’re worthy of better treatment.”

Driving us home from weekends at Jim's, she used to list his faults to me: his hesitation to leave his wife, his refusal to put Mom's name on his house, his drunken diatribes about women and children. Hearing these things, I begged her to leave him, and by the time we slid into our own driveway, I would have a ten-year-old's self-importance to think my pleas had made any impact on her decisions. She would nod gravely and say, "I think you're right, sweetie." That night I might overhear a hushed phone call from her bedroom, followed by a week of her sullenness, banged cabinet doors, the animated menu of some Diane Lane DVD playing all night after she'd passed out on the couch. It would be over by Friday, when she picked me up from school and told me to pack a bag. If I protested, she looked back at me in the rearview.

"Do you want me to be alone for the rest of my life?" she'd say.

Later, when we all lived together, I started sneaking out of the house to meet men. Some of these men got me high. I was lurching up the front steps one night, rigid and awkward as a toy soldier, when I saw my mother's pale face hovering by the door.

"Where have you been?" she said, bunching her nightgown at her throat. "He's been a holy terror. Says he's going to call the police next time. You don't have to endure him while you're off doing—I don't even want to know what you're doing—but how do you think I—?"

"Shut up," I said, pushing past her, "just shut the fuck up. I can't stand either of you."

In our recent phone calls, Mom has barely mentioned Jim. Now she invokes the DUI, the Breathalyzer, almost as afterthoughts.

“What an asshole,” says Thessaly, then claps a hand over her mouth. “Sorry! I had no right to say that.”

“That’s okay,” says Mom. “I don’t think he’s offended. Are you, sweetie?”

“Why don’t we talk about something else?” I say, though I can barely contain the relief spreading through me. This must be the opposite of how parents feel when their children find friends in whom to confide their triumphs and frustrations, when the parents start to hear less of these things themselves. I am grateful to be passed over. There is so much I no longer want to know. The waitress clears our plates, leaves fortune cookies behind. They turn to paste between our teeth.

Thessaly hangs back at the register, unsure of whether Mom is going to pay. “Her too,” Mom says to the hostess and points at Thessaly, who startles and jerks toward us, prodded back to the herd. Outside we squint under the narrow awning and fumble toward goodbyes.

“It was so nice to meet you,” says Thessaly. She shuffles toward me, cocking her head in my direction. This awkward gesture charms me off my guard and I put my arms around her.

“It was nice to meet you too.”

High-pitched giggles hijack her body. She pulls away, smoothing her garment with her fingertips. “Thanks,” she says. “I just have a thing. A touching thing. Sorry, I’m a dork.” She takes a few steps backward.

“See you at group tomorrow?” Mom calls after her.

“If I’m still breathing,” says Thessaly, already halfway across the parking lot. She gives a nervous laugh, waves, and turns away. Mom and I stand for a moment in silence, watching her

back. The whole length of her appears to teeter back and forth as she walks, a sedated version of the inflatable tube people outside car dealerships.

“I hope you don’t mind that I invited her,” says Mom.

“Not at all.”

“She’s a sweet kid. Did she tell you why she quit studying art?”

“No.”

“Her focus was on woodcuts. One day she used the scalpel to slit her wrists. She says it was an accident, but no one believes it. I worry about her.”

I want to tell her this girl is the last person she should be worried about, the first person being herself. Thessaly’s sweet, I want to say, but she’s drug-seeking, she’ll be strung out in a month, tops, but I don’t say any of this.

Mom looks suddenly spooked. “Was there something you wanted to tell me?”

I shift the notebook from one armpit to the other. “About the way I treated you when I was using,” I say. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about it, and—”

“That’s all right, sweetie.” She is staring off into the parking lot; I wonder if she is even listening.

“No, really. When I would leave the house all night, and you didn’t know where I was, and the way I’d talk to you when I got back—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” It is the first time I’ve heard her raise her voice in years. Her neck tightens as if she has committed to not looking at me.

“Please,” she goes on. “I’m too fragile right now. I can’t even look at the things I’ve done yet.”

I look at my mother in the dull light coming off the blacktop, and all at once I am filled with rage for the nurses at the hospital who cut her hair so short. I picture squat, scowling women in beige uniforms, handling its Gordian tangles through gloves, too much hassle to unravel before their cigarette breaks, so out came the shears, while she lolled in their chair like a mannequin, too doped to say no.

“Come on,” I say, touching her arm. “Let me take you home.”

Sandra

Three rainy days and half of Austin wants chamomile tea, mushroom soup, hot chocolate capped with aerosol whip and nutmeg.

“Brr,” says my first table of the morning, a plump girl in long sleeves, the bill of her UT cap pulled low. “Chilly.” It is maybe seventy-five degrees out. Had I lived here longer I might find this endearing, but with my limited exposure it just seems silly.

The windows are a few shades lighter than when I clocked out at midnight, the neon sign a slash of fondant against the gray. The café has no clock, which is perhaps a nod to its being open 24/7 and perhaps just an oversight. I don’t check my phone at work; I don’t wear a watch either. I like to track my shifts by the sky, training myself into an old, agrarian frequency, from a time before there was such thing as minutes to trickle in the gut.

“She looked mixed to me,” Cindy is saying when I turn into the kitchen. Cindy is my weekday manager. She bleaches her hair until it is almost white, has deep, sprawling crow’s feet, and calls everyone in the café “honey.” No one has any idea how old she is.

“Mixed what?” asks Levi, who is thirty-two and has worked here since he turned sixteen, except for two months when he tried to go to dance school in New York. “What mixed with what?”

“I say Lebanese,” says Bria, a girl about my age, with vivid green eyes I suspect are the spell of colored contacts.

“You can’t just guess ‘Lebanese,’” says Levi. “That is way too specific.”

“Watch me be right.”

“If it comes out that she was Lebanese—and I’m not even talking *half*-Lebanese—you’ve got a bottle of Maker’s, on me.”

I smile and nod in everyone’s general direction. By the end of my shift I’ll have spliced together enough sound bites to know what they’re talking about, like walking in and out of a movie I wasn’t invited to. I slit open a packet of cocoa powder and dump it in a mug. I’ve been working here two months—humanity’s stint on earth, on this place’s evolutionary timeline. Compared to me, Bria is the world’s first flower, Levi a fish out of the Cambrian explosion.

“We’re loyal to our employees,” said Cindy when she hired me, my second day in town. “Look around: it’s nothing but old-timers here.” Half my aloofness is that I feel uninitiated—I’m waiting for someone to beckon me inside the walk-in and pour pickle juice over my head, chanting—and the other half is that I like it this way. I’m wary of ingesting whatever keeps people here half their lives.

When I come back with the hot chocolate, the whole café is looking down at their phones. There is a sound, one unified drone, that resolves into the composite blare of everyone’s phone alerts going off at once. I hear it in my own pocket with a twinge of solidarity.

“Flash flood warning,” the UT girl says. She drags her face into a cartoon sulk. “I may be here awhile.”

“Take all the time you need.” I slide toward a table that needs bussing, but the girl isn’t finished talking.

“This rain really is out of control,” she says. “They had to shut down Barton Creek today. A lady drowned.”

“How awful,” I say, meaning the table, with its glut of spent creamers, its syrup spill. Bria beats me to it. She narrows her bright, tigery eyes at me as she clears.

“Sorry,” I say, coming behind her with a damp rag.

“What?” She looks down at the table. “Oh, fuck that. I was just eavesdropping. Did you know she ate here Monday night?”

“Who?”

“The woman who drowned. Sandra something. You probably served her.”

My rag stops in mid-arc across the table. Bria arches an eyebrow. “Pretty creepy, huh? You never know when you’re serving someone their last meal.”

“I don’t remember a Sandra,” I say.

She shrugs. “Everybody eats here,” she says, heading for the kitchen, “and everybody dies.”

*

By now I’ve seen enough death that you’d think I’d be inoculated. The two grandparents who survived to see me born, waxy mannequins in open caskets. My brother Evan’s collie run over on our street. Our dad, from cirrhosis when I was fourteen. In my single semester of college, I read *Mrs Dalloway* for a literature class. *Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace—* the only words I underlined in that or any class. One night that semester, I met a boy on Grindr. We went to a bar, took shots and then coke, drove back to my apartment, and had numb, drunken sex. On his way home he listed into the opposite lane and collided head-on with another car. The

boy died on impact; the other driver, a girl my age, was helicoptered to the nearest hospital, where she bled out internally. I hadn't exchanged numbers with the boy. We had no mutual friends. I recognized his photo in the student paper a few days later, in an article about the accident. For a week afterward I glanced into the wastebasket in my bathroom, at the dead boy's condom nested among crumpled Kleenex, before I told myself I was being morbid and unsanitary and took out the garbage. Since then I've lost my taste for alcohol. Another reason I'm not popular at work: on the rare night I am asked out for post-shift drinks, I fake exhaustion and head quickly for my car.

Stray glances snag me like cobwebs. I know I'm acting strangely—bumping into Levi and Bria more often than usual, garbling basic phrases like “this booth over here” and “have a nice day, stay dry”—but I can't seem to get a grip on myself. Cindy sends me on break early. I order my staff meal—the same thing every day, gingerbread pancakes stuffed with banana, a side of bacon—and shove syrup-logged bites into my mouth while poring over Monday night's sign-in sheet. The names are all crossed out, as if everyone died after eating here. When I spot the name, in my own handwriting, I feel a cold splash of recognition: “Sandra, party of three.”

Bria said *Sandra* like *mandrake*, while the beautiful woman who came in Monday night said her name *Sandra* like *songbird*. I saw immediately that she was too good for this place. She was tall, standing shoulders and chest above the lip of the host stand. Her eyes were green, but not the radioactive tint of Bria's; the irises were washed with copper and rimmed in a darker green, like the rind of an avocado. I could see the individual raindrops working their way through the auburn mesh of her hair, a sheen of runoff on her shoulders, which were bare except for spaghetti straps and dusted with freckles. The lamp bolted to the host stand caught a shimmer of coral gloss across her lips. A jarring detail—I judged her to be about forty—but she gave the gloss

a kind of gravity. For a moment I allowed myself to imagine other girlish affectations—a charm necklace slipped between her breasts, under her green sundress a pair of white panties printed with strawberries.

“They’re parking the car,” she said softly, to explain her solitude. I scrabbled for menus and silverware and led her to a booth, forgetting the café’s policy about seating incomplete parties. I must have been gaping at her like a love-struck fool. She flashed me a hesitant smile before looking down at her menu.

She seemed entirely unaware of her effect, and her oblivion produced an equal and opposite response in me. I was suddenly conscious of the glaze of sweat across my forehead, my hair teased to steel wool by the humidity, the smear of mustard congealing along the knuckles of my left hand. These things had never shamed me before, not even when I took the orders of handsome boys. As much as she excited me, I was relieved to duck my head and turn back to the host stand. Two men were waiting for me there. One was middle-aged and short, with a thin mustache and neatly cropped dark hair, cottony tufts of white at each temple. The other was younger, maybe thirty, black hair slicked behind his ears, his shirt the shade and texture of a red hibiscus, unbuttoned far enough to show a smooth swath of chest. “Sandra, party of three,” said the older one. Not his own name, not “I’m looking for my wife.” There was a deference in his voice I wasn’t used to hearing from men his age. I led them to Sandra. They sat down on opposite sides of her, leaving half the booth vacant. Whatever their relationship, physical proximity to her seemed more a luxury than a right.

“Can I get y’all something to drink?” I asked.

The men glanced at her. “I’ll follow Sandra’s lead,” said the older one. Sandra kept her eyes on the menu, though I could tell she was absorbing their glances, weighing them inside herself with invisible scales. I wondered if she was famous, though I was sure I hadn’t seen her in anything. At last she glanced up at me.

“I’ll have a tequila sunrise,” she said.

The older man nodded, as if her selection had passed a test. “Three tequila sunrises,” he said to me.

“Iced tea for me,” countered the younger man. “Someone’s gotta drive.”

Ordinarily her order would have annoyed me. Mixed drinks require fetching multiple vessels and measuring, slowing me down. But as I poured out Sandra’s bright yellow drink, I found myself admiring her selection. It seemed a hopeful act of sorcery. As if to conjure the sun itself out of all this rain and muck.

*

Three days later, a pair of detectives enters the café, a man and a woman. They wear their badges directly on the breasts of their uniforms, sparing them the ceremony of announcing themselves, flipping open ID booklets. The woman wears her hair in a ponytail so tight a vein bulges blue against her temple.

“Will y’all be eating with us?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

“Not today, sweetie,” says the woman. “Could we have a word with your manager?”

Her counterpart is tall and boxy, bald in a virile way. He gives me a tight smile that does nothing to put me at ease.

“I’ll go get her,” I say.

In the kitchen, Cindy is funneling beans into the coffeemaker. “There are two cops out front for you,” I say.

She smiles. “Uh-oh, honey. What did you do?”

Seeing the look on my face, she loses the smile. “Easy there,” she says, rettying the bag of beans. “This happens all the time.”

Cindy waves the cops toward a back booth. I watch them from the corner of my eye as I seat my first few parties. The male cop pulls a sheet out of a manila envelope and slides it over to Cindy. She squints as she studies it, her crow’s-feet bunching. They don’t talk long. After a few minutes they all stand up, shake hands. Then Cindy starts walking toward me, the cops behind her. The air becomes unbreathable. I feel new, synthetic organs drop into place to keep me from suffocating.

“These nice folks would like to chat with you for a minute,” says Cindy. Dropping her voice: “Why don’t y’all go on the patio?”

The rain has slacked off. It clicks against the plastic tarp, steady and insistent as mucus. The patio is empty and steams like a greenhouse. We sit at a picnic table.

“I’m Detective Muñoz,” says the woman. “This is Detective Patrick. We’re investigating the recent death of Sandra La Paz.”

La Paz. Stupidly, I think that Bria will not be getting her bottle of Maker's.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions," says Detective Patrick. "Is that all right with you?"

My throat feels too tight for speech, so I just nod. He pulls the sheet back out of his envelope. "This image may be disturbing to you," he says, sounding just like the typed warnings on the screen before cop shows, "but we'd appreciate it if you took a look."

In the photo, Sandra is splayed face-up on a table. She is naked and a corpse. Hair brined to algae by mud and silt plasters one side of her face. I think I see a fine scrim of sediment covering her flesh, which has not bloated or turned blue, but just looks ripe, blanched with exposure, like something scraped out of a shell. Her eyes stare out in froggy unrecognition. I can't look at them, so I look down at her breasts instead; gravity presses them to soft puddles against her ribs. A thin fuse of hair slips from her navel to a dark tidy plot between her legs. Staring there, I feel a sudden throb of anger. A delicate mystery has been chewed up and hocked at my feet. I hadn't wanted to see such a beautiful person naked in this way. I had been warned, asked nicely, but I hadn't been given a choice, not really.

"Do you recognize this person?" Detective Patrick asks me. I jerk my head yes and he pulls the photo back.

"She came in for dinner Monday night," I manage to say.

"Do you remember what time?"

“I don’t check the time during my shifts. I just know it was dark.” Detective Muñoz writes something down. “You could always check the time on her ticket,” I say, scrambling to be helpful. “There are copies in the office.”

She looks at me as if I have just explained to her a very basic and obvious aspect of her job. Then she asks, “Was Ms. La Paz alone?”

“No,” I say. “There were two men with her.”

“Can you describe them?”

Detective Muñoz scribbles down what I say. A grackle hops onto a corner table, plucks a jelly packet out of its caddy, and spears it with his beak. We find these packets all over the patio, pierced in the middle and sucked clean. Detective Patrick is watching the bird too. He meets my eyes and smiles—more warmly this time, showing square, white teeth. I lack the grip on ordinary things to smile back.

“Did Ms. La Paz order food?” asks Detective Muñoz.

I lean my head back and shut my eyes, as if trying to extract the answer from the future instead of the past. “She had...redfish, with rice pilaf, and a side salad.” An image of these items half-digested in Sandra’s drowned body hijacks my mind.

“What did she have to drink?”

“A tequila sunrise.”

“Just one?”

Does it matter? “She had a few.”

“How many is a few?”

“I don’t remember exactly. Three or four. Over the course of a few hours.” Detective Muñoz keeps writing. “Three,” I say after a silence, though I’m still not sure.

“At any point during dinner,” asks Detective Patrick, “did Ms. La Paz strike you as being intoxicated?”

For the rest of that evening, I’d paid little attention to my other tables. Each coffee refill, each credit card raised to scissor the air, was a brute distraction from Sandra. I checked on her more times than was necessary, aware I was becoming a pest but unable to stop myself. She kept giving me that same wavering smile: the smile of an actress silently willing me not to draw her the attention of the whole café. My hovering annoyed the men. After a while, the older one started holding up two fingers for another round of sunrises without looking at me. The younger one met my recurring check-ins with a haughty arch of his brows that made me want to rip his fancy shirt the rest of the way open, ruin the buttons. But whenever I returned with her drink, Sandra rewarded me with a real smile, her face melting into gratitude, as if to sublimate the rudeness of her company. Once, setting down her glass, I felt her hand encircle my wrist.

“Such a darling,” she said. Her voice was throaty and low. Alcohol and citrus bloomed from her pores. I could still feel the warm band of her touch as I circled back to the kitchen.

It had to have been more than three. Even four seemed conservative. They could go into the office whenever they wanted, check the security footage and find out I’d lied.

“She seemed to be enjoying her drinks,” I say. My voice is clunky with bullshit. It feels as if I’m defending my own drinking.

Detective Muñoz looks up from her notepad. “Ms. La Paz’s autopsy revealed a blood alcohol content of 0.35. Now, a postmortem BAC is always going to be less reliable, but in any case, it appears she was dangerously intoxicated.”

The grackle flaps off, dropping the jelly packet to the bricks with an unnaturally loud smack. A heat climbs up my neck and into my face.

“She didn’t drive to the creek, did she?” I ask. “The younger guy, he only had iced tea. He said he was going to drive.”

“An eyewitness saw a young man matching the description you gave us leaving the driver’s seat of Ms. La Paz’s car, on a residential street near the scene of the accident,” says Detective Patrick. “So no, it’s unlikely she drove.”

I think of the training videos I had to watch on the computer in the managers’ office, awkwardly staged scenarios in which a cast of amateurs took turns playing the responsible waitress, the vampy underage drinker, the belligerent patron who demands to be served more alcohol. Each video paused at the moment of decision, offering a multiple-choice range of options for what the server should do. Afterward there were lists of penalties I couldn’t remember for serving minors, drunks, and addicts. The drunk character spoke in a slurred babble and knocked over a bowl of nuts. The underage girl wore a yellow Scrunchie in her hair, plumped up her tiny breasts over the bar. If only it were that easy, I think now. If only the world operated on bad acting and explicit cues. I’ve always been terrible at telling when people are drunk or high. Growing up with my father made Evan and me oblivious instead of experts. We assumed any father would stump into his boys’ room late at night, still in his work clothes, and curl against them to mutter on the Kennedy assassination, conjure up Jackie O grasping for bits

of blown skull. That all sons charted filial pecking order by who took the legs and who took the arms to drag him inside from the porch.

“We’ve had a lot of rain this summer,” says Detective Patrick, as if I don’t know this. “The creek swells, people overestimate their strength at swimming, and some of them drown. It’s sad, but it happens all the time. We’re just trying to rule out any circumstances that might make this more than an accident.”

Sandra had not spoken much while she ate, but by the end of dinner she had retreated into a cocoon of serenity. The men craned their necks to bicker across her shoulders. The older one kept scribbling something with his finger on the table’s wet plastic cover. The younger one would study the diagram for a moment, then laugh and shake his head in dispute. Sandra floated above it all. Now and then she would glance down at them and grin, as if listening to the squabbling of her own children. “Thank you, dear,” she whispered as I took their plates, the men oblivious of our exchange. I stacked the plates in a bus tub, a proportionate weight building inside me. They would pay soon and leave me even more alone than I’d felt before.

The men switched to coffee.

“Coffee for the lady?” I asked Sandra.

“One more tequila sunrise,” the older man cut in. At this Sandra closed her eyes and laid a hand on his shoulder, a plea from far away.

He leaned his face against hers, lined up the bridges of their noses. “What are you worried about?” he murmured. “We have a driver.”

“Fine,” she said. She pulled her face away and smiled at me. “I surrender. One more.”

How could I have missed these signals? How could I have imagined this woman in control, the men in her thrall, when all along they were propping her up, boxing her in, sedating her? The obvious answer is that I don't give a shit about my job. I marry the dregs of two stale coffee pots and pour them out for customers, leaving an extra fistful of creamers in apology. I wipe down table after table without changing rags so they look clean but are actually dirtier than before. If a guest needs *anything else*, they'd better speak up because I'm not going to hang around to ask.

But Sandra was different. She inspired in me the genuine urge serving requires you to mimic: the desire to give someone whatever they need. If she'd asked me for something I'd never heard of, I would have tried to get it for her.

"Are you saying," I ask, picking my way through the question like a thicket, "that someone might have gotten her drunk on purpose?"

"It's certainly possible," says Detective Muñoz. "At this stage of the investigation, all avenues have to be explored."

The tempo of the rain has accelerated. I can feel the drops against the tarp, swarming me. The lease on my apartment only runs through the end of the month. I don't even have a Texas driver's license. I could leave tomorrow, pick up my last paycheck and drive to my mother's house in Mississippi, Evan's apartment in Nashville.

"I didn't mean to over-serve her," I say. "If I did, it was an accident."

Detective Muñoz stops writing and squints at me. The vein in her temple torques.

“Son,” she says, “you know you’re not in any trouble here, right? We’re just talking. Whatever happened, it wasn’t your fault.”

Detective Patrick slides me a card. “We appreciate your taking the time to talk to us today. If you remember anything else, give us a call.”

Levi cranes his neck to watch Detective Patrick’s retreating back. “Was he the good cop,” he asks me, smirking, “or the bad cop?”

I twist my face into a smile and walk past him into the kitchen. Cindy blocks my path.

“Go on break,” she says.

“But I was just gone.”

“That wasn’t a break,” she says. “Check the window, honey.”

She’s ordered my usual, gingerbread pancakes with banana, but I barely touch them.

*

Three o’clock on Sunday, at the close of brunch, the sun shines and everything is whetted by the rain, the car hoods and Dumpster lids and flame-colored peacock flowers polished with intent to hurt. I keep my eyes to the pavement. Levi calls shotgun and gallops ahead of me, tugging at the passenger-side handle before I can unlock the car.

“Joke’s on you,” says Bria. “I love sitting in the back. It’s the one piece of childhood I have left.”

Inside, we shimmy out of our clothes and into swimsuits. I blast the air and think of our bare asses scooting across my seats. Bria directs me west through touch-and-go traffic. Levi starts talking about a show we have all watched. As I chime in, my hands slacken on the wheel. I begin to feel less of a cabbie, more a member of the outing. The smell of mustard prickles our unwashed skin like a common disease.

I turn into a neighborhood of neat stucco bungalows with xeriscaped lawns, gray pebbles and sprays of agave. I wonder if she lived somewhere like this, if she kept succulents along the windowsill, a rock garden out back, everything needing no tending or water, conforming to her air of cool non-effort. I park on the street and Bria leads us to a trail that opens onto Barton Creek. The creek is still closed, but there is no fine posted, so we swing our legs over. Our numbers make me feel more apathetic than safe: whatever trouble we get into will land less heavily across all three of us.

The trail is wide and sandy. Halfway down it tightens and chokes with deeply pored stones. These give way to narrow shelves of rock tiered like stairs. I wonder if these are naturally occurring formations, steps for elves, the way Dad told Evan and me that moss was their carpet, acorn caps their helmets. More likely a park service gutted the hillside and installed them for easier walking.

Whatever happened, it's not your fault. My gratitude that I will not be arrested for Sandra's death has drained to reveal my guilt intact, an acrid stubble at the bottom of the cup. "Not your fault," what everyone kept repeating to Evan and me when Dad died. Just in case we might think it was—yet even as I unlearned the coordinates of the mole on his cheek, the cat's-tongue roughness of his neck, his laugh, I never forgot the recipe for the old-fashioned I mixed

for him every afternoon. One sugar cube, two ounces of Monkey Shoulder, two cloudy half-moons of ice from the tray in the freezer, dismayingly distant from the drinks I saw in magazines and commercials, the miniature sparkling bergs sunk in amber. No one had the chance to tell me it wasn't my fault about the boy who died, the girl he killed. I never mentioned it to anyone. My certainty that this is what people would say only proved the hollowness of the sentiment and kept me quiet. Now I hear these things shuffle around in me like people in an elevator, the polite murmur that there is room for one more.

Levi stops to unzip his backpack. He pulls out a Powerade bottle three quarters full of something other than its original contents. He swigs with a squint and passes it to Bria. Dully it strikes me why I have been invited along, why it was suggested we take my car. Next it strikes me that I don't care. I've brought a book, earphones. Bria makes a crisp sound at the back of her throat. Her eyes glint at Levi.

"I'm gonna get the fuck out of here," she announces.

"This natural beauty isn't enough for you?" he says.

"Sure, it's nice," she says, "but it's home. I need to get *away*. I'm gonna pack my dog and my tent and drive out to Utah for a month."

"Just don't become a sister wife," says Levi.

"If I do," she says, taking another pull from the bottle, "I'll make sure I'm the second or third one. The second one is the one who doesn't get fucked with, and the third one is, like, the hot one."

We can hear the creek hissing around the corner. “You think Cindy will just let you disappear?” says Levi.

“She let you traipse off for two months to be a ballerina.”

“*Danseur*,” he says. “And, luckily for everyone, that didn’t pan out.”

I want to ask him what happened at dance school, but I feel I know already, without having to ask. The strange guilt of suddenly having purpose. The pressure of dreams becoming work instead of your workday opiate. The money.

“What about it, honey? You want some extra shifts?”

I look up to see Bria is talking to me. I force a laugh.

“I thought we weren’t going to talk about the café,” I say, echoing a declaration Levi made in the car.

“He’s got a point,” says Levi.

The beach is lined with other people ignoring the closure. A young father in a boater hat sits waist-deep in the shallows, letting his baby daughter splash in the inlet of his legs. The sweet char of pot floats from a circle of teenagers under a redbud. We emerge from the trailhead, feral brutes sticky with grease, hair mashed by our work caps, my skin nocturnally pale against all these tanned and freckled limbs.

Levi takes a squishy plastic pouch out of his bag.

“Are we making daiquiris?” asks Bria.

“Dead Sea mud,” he pronounces.

“What for?”

“For your skin. Lots of lovely minerals.”

He demonstrates, squeezing some into his hand and spreading it over his chest. His torso vanishes under a lacquer of greenish brown, his nipples and navel effaced. He tilts the bag toward Bria.

“That shit stinks.”

“Come on.”

“Rain check,” she says drily, grabbing the Powerade bottle from him.

“I’ll take some,” I say.

Levi smiles, squeezing the mud into my hands. I expect it to come out in clumps; instead it’s as smooth as chocolate soft-serve. The mineral smell is not quite fecal, not quite unpleasant. I palm it onto my neck and shoulders and chest, feel the cool sediment slide between the sun and me. Bria ends up smearing a footballer streak over each cheekbone.

“You’re gonna want to rinse this off when it dries,” says Levi. By now he is completely slathered; his eyes and nostrils gleam through the mud. “It starts to burn.”

Levi and I stretch out on our towels to bake. Bria wades in, yelping when the cold water touches her bikini bottom, her belly, her shoulders. The creek is still glutted with rainwater. It reaches her neck, but we can see down to the stones smooth as eggs along the bottom. She paddles around to face us.

“Do you think this is where it happened?”

We don't have to ask what she means. I have been wondering the same thing, though it seems impossible to imagine it happening here, on a day like this. The air buzzes with sun and weed. The baby reels out sweet, nonsense syllables in her father's lap. Both Levi and Bria are looking at me, waiting for my response.

“No idea,” I say.

“Those cops didn't tell you?” says Levi.

“They didn't tell me much.”

“Y'all were on the patio for a good minute.”

“Most of their questions were pretty standard,” I say. “When she came in, what she ordered.”

“I think it was those guys she was with,” says Bria. “They seemed like mafia to me.”

“The Lebanese mafia?” says Levi.

“You never know.”

“What do you think?” he asks me.

I don't know what I think. Maybe the younger man was Sandra's lover and the older man, her husband, had found out about them. Maybe the two men were lovers and were going to run away together with her money. I prefer to think it was just someone's dumb idea to walk down to the creek in the middle of the night in the pouring rain. By then she had finally tired of

listening to them bicker. Under the tequila's spell, the tug of the creek gave substance to that elemental pull, to be alone, to be away. So she slipped off on her own while they stood on the pebbled shore, yelling and shoving one another. She wanted to feel the creek suck at her bare flesh, laughed at the sight of her dress and bra and panties ghosting away downstream. The burning of her spent limbs was a fire too distant to feel. Perhaps it felt right to lay them aside. To let the current take her where it wanted.

Levi and Bria exchange a glance. This pulls me back into the day; I realize I haven't answered. Already the mud is going rigid against my skin.

"This one's personal," says Bria. "I could tell when I told you about it: you've got feelings. That lady must've tipped you a fortune."

When at last they had paid and were standing to leave, I didn't notice how she teetered upright, her head heavy. I was too busy marking the places where sweat had pinned her dress to the skin beneath. The younger man offered her his shoulder as she stood on one foot to fit the other back into a sandal. Then she swayed toward me, and I couldn't do anything but stand there in front of her, my whole body thrumming. Whatever I needed to pass between us, it would happen right then or not at all.

And what did I expect? That she would take my hand in hers and tell me I was good, like her, too good to be here? *Such a darling*. But she only leaned forward, brushed the hair from my forehead with damp fingertips, and printed a kiss there.

"You were wonderful," she said. The simple syrup of a drunk woman's gratitude, though I couldn't see it then. The younger man tightened his mouth at me as he passed; the older one brushed by as if I weren't there. But I didn't care about them. I had the benediction I needed. A

fever waved through my body, as if her kiss were something to which I was allergic. There was nothing left on their table, no sign they'd ever been there but a copy of the receipt and one of the older man's strange diagrams, coalescing into fat droplets.

A helicopter breaks the tree line and crawls over our heads. After I left school, I used to dream I was being lifted into one. In the dream I wasn't strapped to a gurney. Instead, a strong arm hooked around my back; someone I couldn't see hauled me up a ladder that dangled like a fishing line. My head tipped backward; the wreck, flipped in my vision, swung as it shrank.

I push myself off my elbows and stagger into the creek. The water is cold, but I clench my jaw and sink to my shoulders all at once, get it over with. A halo of Dead Sea mud follows me deeper into the water. The stones ache almost pleasantly against the soles of my feet. Behind me Levi scrubs himself in the shallows, whistling like Steamboat Willie. Bria rests on her back, only the placid bowl of her face visible above the surface. Just beyond where she floats, the bottom drops off and the current picks up. On the opposite bank I see a rope swing hanging from a tall tree and am filled with a senseless longing to reach it. I close my eyes and stroke, my arms quick overhead knives, until my chest burns and I am grunting for breath. When I open my eyes, the tree and the rope are no closer than before. I want to burst into tears. The water keeps coming in a heedless treadmill I can't adjust. My daydream of Sandra returns in a warm bloom of shame. I don't know shit about drowning. The humiliation of the struggle. The choking lungfuls that punish you when you can't go on any longer.

I seem to burn vast amounts of energy and still advance only by inches. My mind fires with all sorts of fierce, suspect promises. Tomorrow I'll give notice at the café. I'll take out a loan, enroll in classes at UT. I'll apply for some campus job where I'll sit at a desk all day and no

one will come into my life for a few hours late at night and then die. I'll go to AA, or church, make some new, clean-cut friends who still dream of doing something with their lives. I'll die, like everybody else, preferably not too soon and not too late either.

The bank is tentacled with branches; I clutch at one, and it snaps off in my hand. A sob blocks my throat. I grab again; this one holds. My foot slips into a rocky groove, and I haul myself streaming out of the water. My limbs feel slick and weak as a newborn calf's as I mount the wooden steps along the side of the tree. When I reach its high crotch, I stretch my torso along the bark and rest. They are looking up at me.

"New guy can fly," says Bria.

"It's the mud," says Levi. "It has power."

Bria starts to wail and splash. "Don't do it, man! You've got your whole life ahead of you!"

I had forgotten I was afraid of heights; it has been a while since I had to reckon with them. The rope feels rough and dense in my hands, but I don't trust it. I kick off.

There is a protocol to this, a clarity inside the fear. Hold on tight. Let go at the top of the arc. Breathe out through your nose, hard. The water swings up to meet me and it is all over. I drop. The impact fills my ears in the dark. Then the current takes me back the way I came, and I don't have to do anything at all.

Not Like Here

Gay boys left Mississippi as soon as they could. They left for Austin, Nashville, Chicago, Boston; a few, New York. Their faces on subways plowed through the social media feeds of those left behind, sweating and pouty in that urinous aquarium light. Tank top straps sutured to their shoulders; lips jutting. It was *hot* there, *so* hot, too *hot*. Though I have never set foot on a subway, I well know the orange molded-plastic seats, the wood-grain wallpaper suggestive of Denny's.

"It can't be any hotter there than here," I say.

"It's a different kind of heat," Kyle says. "Closer. Angrier. Trapped up by bodies and buildings. It piles up on you like all the garbage on the street, with nowhere to go."

The first place Kyle wanted to go, when he got back in town, was the restaurant where I work. I'm off the clock, but still I keep my beer's wet rim off the checkered vinyl cloth. "It just seems a shame," I say, "to move to what is allegedly the most fascinating city in the world and have nothing else to talk about."

Kyle looks up at the ceiling, which bristles with the multi-colored tails of toothpicks patrons have shot out of their straws. "Isn't it funny we never did that, all the times we came here?"

"Here's your chance." I slide a straw to him over the table.

"That's all right. It's just funny," he says again, "what doesn't occur to you when you live somewhere."

"If you lived in Blarney you'd probably never bother to kiss the stone."

He looks over the laminated menu, moans. “Let’s be decadent. I’m getting us some turnip greens, squash casserole, tomato pie, *and* the red bean rolls.”

I don’t have the heart to tell him that after two years of serving it, scraping it into the garbage, and taking it home at discount, the food here has reached a permanent standoff with my stomach. “When you lived here you never wanted to eat here,” I say. “You only ever wanted sushi.”

“I can get sushi anywhere in New York.”

“You can get turnip greens there too, I’m sure.”

“Not like here.” He points his phone at the ceiling and snaps a photo of all those anonymous toothpicks staked in the tiles.

He’s grown an auburn broom-handle mustache and wears a thin gold ring in one ear. “You look so porny,” I said when I picked him up from the Memphis airport. “Oh my god, thank you,” he said, wrapping me in a shockingly pungent hug. Today he’s wearing in daylight something he might have worn years ago to a concert out of town: a highlighter-yellow tank that shows more chest hair than I remember, jagged cutoffs, tube socks, white tennis shoes. He’s back in town for the wedding of two of his Delta Psi brothers. He talks about them as if they were our mutual friends, though I wasn’t invited and he isn’t taking me as a plus-one.

“I told them I wouldn’t come to a wedding at a plantation,” he says, “but they told me it was only plantation-*style*, which honestly is bad enough. They had to link me to the venue’s website to confirm the building was post-war.”

“Thank god for that,” I say. “You might have missed a chance to complain.”

*

We always regretted that we hadn't rented one of the rundown shacks in the heart of town where some of our friends lived and threw parties, somewhere with character and a wild, sprawling yard. Instead we'd chosen a practical unit in a complex near campus with beige furniture and faux hardwood floors. Kyle lived here with me for three years, and yet I feel a twinge of embarrassment as I let us in. I'm grateful I've hung some new prints, replaced some of the Target appliances with actual antiques.

"Am I on the couch tonight?" He points to a stack of blankets I've laid there.

"Or you can sleep with me," I say. "I just thought I'd give you the option." Immediately it occurs to me that I shouldn't have. I'm relieved when he bypasses the couch and takes his things into my room.

Tonight there is a gallery show for an artist we both knew in undergrad. We get ready together in my bathroom. In school this was our ritual—Kyle had his own bathroom—but now it is functional, Kyle's room being taken by Panit, my terminally quiet coworker who always pays his half of the rent on time but never offers to cook a carbonara together, smoke a bowl, try getting hooked on the same Netflix show. Sharing the bathroom was our way of ensuring we could periodically see one another naked but never touch. Kyle strips and does a slow swivel in the mirror. His calves look lovely, and I say so.

"It's all that walking I do now. Girl!" He feigns surprise, outrage. "Where did that ass come from?"

“It’s a rental,” I say, though the truth is that, since ending things with David, I’ve been hitting the YMCA compulsively. Sometimes I go straight there from the restaurant, lift and squat the film of grease off my skin, and once I’ve showered and come back to my desk to start a poem I’ve become a body without a mind, unable to get words down. I once texted Kyle from the gym, remembering with a pang how he used to spot me. He happened to be at a YMCA in Chelsea at that very moment. “We sweat under the same Y,” he texted back.

“Shit,” I say. “I’m low on deodorant. “Can I bum some from you?”

He gives me a bashful grin. “You mean you haven’t noticed?”

“Noticed what?”

“Honey.” A smug pause. “I stink.”

He lifts an elbow coquettishly. The hair falls lank down the length of his pit; a concentrated smell, sharp as gardenias, pricks the air.

I think of his smelly hug, fresh off the plane. “I mean, yeah, I noticed, but...you mean, on purpose?”

“Not at first,” he says, his shoulders loosening a bit: he must have been waiting all this time for me to say something. “I just got tired of buying deodorant all the time, reapplying in public bathrooms, changing clothes. Then it started to make me horny. It’s how I met my partner, actually.”

“Your partner?” I have only ever heard this word used by older gay people, with a kind of stale utility.

“I was riding the L from Brooklyn into Chelsea. I’d just come from the Y, so things were already nice and juicy, and on top of that the A/C in the car was out. I was wearing a tank top and holding onto the rail above my head.” He grabs the towel rack to demonstrate. “My pit was spread open and completely soaked. The car was getting crowded. These people have seen everything—smelled everything—and still they were all scooting back to get away from me. All except this one guy. He’d gotten on a few stops after me, this tall beanpole of a kid. He was wearing a leather vest with no shirt on underneath, and he was sweating too; I could see it running down his ribs under the vest. He had thick black hair and the sweat separated it into long dark fangs down his face. I saw he was wearing a red hankie in his back left pocket—very seventies—so I felt safe to cruise him. There’s this book, *Gay Semiotics*—”

“I’ve read *Gay Semiotics*.”

“Of course you have; I apologize. Anyway, we were throwing each other little glances, nothing more. But then, as this clearing started to open up around me, he stepped into it. He grabbed the rail just a foot or so away and stood facing me. Now we couldn’t pretend we weren’t looking. His eyes started at my feet—” Kyle faces me, still holding onto the rack, and flicks his eyes down at my own feet. “—and slowly went up my body; he was smirking the whole time.” He performs a faster version of this surveillance on my body, brushing my legs, briefs, chest bare beneath my still-unbuttoned shirt.

“I was a hot mess—my hair was plastered to my forehead, my clothes were sticking all over me. Suddenly I could smell my own stink. I felt embarrassed for the first time since I’d stopped wearing deodorant; I felt just like a little boy in Vidalia again, sneaking peeks at Matthew Chouteau’s penis after swim practice. By the time his eyes reached mine, we were

coming up on a stop. The train slowed down; people pressed toward the doors. When we finally stopped and the crowd surged, the guy leaned over—he's *tall*, he had to crouch—and stuck his whole face in my pit." He leans his face toward me, eyes dreamy, and I instinctively flinch.

"What did you do?" I ask to regain my cool.

"I didn't know what to do; I froze. He stayed like that until the train had thinned out by half, and then he just straightened up—I remember the tip of his nose was wet—and went and sat down at the other end of the train."

I scrape residue out of my deodorant applicator and scrub it into my pits. "And what happened then?"

"Nothing, for a minute. I could barely breathe, I was so excited. And I didn't know if that was it for him, if he'd gotten what he wanted and was done. But then I thought, in New York, that's probably about as strong a sign of interest as you're ever going to get. So a few stops later I went over and sat next to him. It was harder to make eye contact this time. For a while we both just stared forward out the window. But then I just said, 'Fuck it,' and I leaned over into his armpit and sniffed him right back."

He looks slyly at me, hungry for my response. My skin feels tight, as if some protective layer has formed around me. "Dogs must have the right idea," I say a little coldly.

"What's the matter, bitch? You getting horny?"

I turn sharply toward the sink. "Are we back in the locker room?" I drop my voice. "'You got a boner, bro?'"

"His name is Morgan. He's a metalwork artist. We've been together ever since."

“I’m sure you save on water.” I start to button my shirt. His smile collapses in the mirror and a hand goes to his hip.

“You think I’m disgusting.”

“Isn’t that the point?”

“It’s just a kink, sweetheart. Besides, I thought you knew.”

All his sweaty selfies tick by in my mind, snapshots of a smell. *So hot today.* “I just thought you were complaining.”

*

I met Clay, the artist, at a mixer during my brief flirtation with pledging Delta Psi, the only fraternity on campus that expressly permitted, even encouraged, gay brothers.

“The only prohibition is incest,” said the (straight) upperclassman who visited our dorm to recruit. He addressed this to me alone—Kyle would not come out, even to me, for another semester. “You don’t play around with your brothers.”

“Well, I don’t know how *he* learned to masturbate,” said Kyle when the scout had left. But I could tell the prospect of brotherhood had intrigued him. Back in Vidalia he had an older brother and various boy cousins, and he’d played soccer all through Catholic school. I’d grown up the only child of a single mother in a wooded hamlet in Rankin County populated mainly by childless old people; I’d never felt the need for these male bulwarks.

“Think we should check it out?” Kyle said shyly. “Might get some free drinks out of it, in any case.”

So it was that Kyle, with his then swoopy bangs, his L.L. Bean plaids and khakis passed down from taller, broader-shouldered relatives and washed to a soft fade, dived headfirst into a world of boys, some gay, but mostly straight and “open-minded,” whose loving enclosure fortified him to figure himself out in a way our friendship apparently never could—though I had declared myself from the beginning, had tearfully explained to him how you could get herpes from a rimjob because I’d learned it firsthand, had introduced him to my short-lived boyfriend who spent whole afternoons making dreamcatchers in the Grove. Later I would wonder whether I’d shared these things intending all along to provoke a confession from him, but now I feel sure I hadn’t known. I was after a different satisfaction altogether—that of confiding, graphically, in that rarest of confidants: a sensitive and nonjudgmental straight boy.

“I just wish you’d felt like you could tell me sooner,” was all I could think to say the night he sprawled on his bunk and told me, with a bashful glow in his face and voice, that he’d been seeing Clay for a month.

“We’re not *dating*, really,” he said, then sat up and covered his mouth with his hands. “Wow. I can’t believe I’m saying this stuff. Dating. Dating a boy.”

“Which you’re not doing,” I said.

“Sorry. Anyway, it’s not like we can walk around the square holding hands or have picnics in the Grove. You know what it’s like. So we mainly just hook up in his dorm when his roommate’s not home.”

“Do you ever hook up here, when I’m not home?” I asked, trying to sound uninterested.

Kyle looked horrified. “No. I wouldn’t disrespect you like that.”

I wondered whether the true mettle of our friendship might have revealed itself had I simply walked in on Kyle with Clay's cock in his mouth.

"It's weird, though," he went on. "I feel like I'm always chasing him, like I have to keep reminding him to text me when the coast is clear and I can come over. Sometimes I don't hear from him all night and then I find out from a Facebook post that some of the other Delta Psis dragged him out to the square. But even when it works out and we hook up—even after we've both come—he's the sweetest, cutest, most perfect little twink in the universe."

"I know," I said, unable to stop my mouth.

He looked at me as if he'd just realized he hadn't only been talking to himself. "You do?"

I tried to keep my voice in the same bored register. "We fucked once, after that first mixer at the Delta Psi house. He's adorable, but classic tortured Catholic schoolboy. A freak once you get him naked, but he wouldn't even kiss me after. Shame."

Kyle's face had drained of color. I got up, methodically gathered my towel, flip flops, and shower caddy, and left for the bathroom. We barely spoke for three days.

Clay left Delta Psi as a sophomore and didn't come out until the summer before his senior year, when he fell in love with William, a theater major who played Prior in the university production of *Angels in America*. Clay had spent the first three years of his BFA painting technically flawless but embarrassingly earnest scenes from the lives of the saints, but this late tension between his faith and his sexuality exploded his style. Kyle and I attended his thesis show together. By this time we'd restyled our split over Clay as a warm private joke. We entered the art building laughing and clutching at each other, but Clay's pieces knocked the smug grins

off our faces: floor-to-ceiling canvases depicting male nude pietas, drag Madonnas, a pornographic Judas kiss. Admittedly, two years later this has all congealed into formula, and it isn't long tonight before Kyle says something about it.

“Slap a halo on a naked twink and call it a day. I guess that still passes for subversive around here.”

“Keep your voice down,” I say, blue-lipped and giggling from the free wine. “You can spray your poison and leave, but some of us have to live here.”

“You don't *have* to live here,” he says. He sounds for the first time truly irritated, not merely amusing himself. I try to bury the sting in focusing on the canvases. Most of the nudes appear to be William, with their tell-tale long, pillowy buttocks. William himself stands near the back of the gallery talking to a patron. His hair, which appeared today on his Instagram story in progressively alarming shades of orange and green, has reached its intended result of powder blue. He strikes an ecstatic pose, probably an imitation of his likeness on the canvas I can't see from this angle, but with his mouth stretched back fishlike and his eyes popping. This is their shtick, Clay and William, refined in their online presence and played out endlessly in person—the pious artist and his clowning, boy-child muse.

The space continues to fill with bodies. The usual characters—a smattering of professors, middle-aged townies, students who like me graduated years ago and have begun to mellow into townies themselves, fresh off their shifts at the coffee shop or bookstore. At any moment, behind anyone's back, David could materialize with that open, puckish grin I can no longer return, the new boyfriend at his shoulder, dressed just like David with maddeningly slight variations—button-downs in different colors of the same pattern, chinos for one and slim jeans for the other.

I try to look at the paintings, but all I can see is the way I'm looking, my chin tilted slightly up and my eyes narrowed so that anyone walking in will see me looking proud and cold. Despite his barbs, I'm relieved I at least have Kyle with me: I will not be caught alone.

"The hardest part was getting him to stand still," says Clay, now standing with William and his admirer. He's wearing a belted white tunic splotted with pink, blue, and mustard yellow. The forest-green tights underneath match the wide felt brim of his hat; his shoes appear to be some type of clog.

"Check out Jan Ver-Queer."

Something in the way Kyle bends to whisper this in my ear alerts Clay, who wafts over to us. His round, putto's face opens in shock. This is all for Kyle; I am old news, I do not warrant performance.

"Look who decided to come home!"

He kisses us both on the cheeks, his nostrils flaring a little when he comes close to Kyle. "Where's your running buddy?" he asks me.

David. I wonder if Clay truly doesn't know or is only playing dumb to get the story directly from me. I put on a parody of a brave face. "Couldn't tell you," I say.

"Did you come down just to visit this queen?" Clay asks Kyle.

Kyle's arm comes around my shoulders in a way that feels almost defensive. His armpit opens like a vent. "Naturally!" he says. "But also there's this wedding."

"Ohh, right," says Clay. "The old tribe. I don't get invited to those things. I'm just the sissy stepchild."

Kyle blinks. “It’s a gay wedding.”

“Well, *you* know what I mean,” says Clay, indicating Kyle’s red lace top, which is beginning to turn maroon under the arms. He claps his hands together under his chin. “Together again! Best friends against the world. Could you please kidnap him when you go back? Some of us have to hang around and bedazzle this little ditch, but he’s destined for bigger things.”

“I’ll put a bug in his ear,” Kyle says, squeezing me against him. Somehow it doesn’t surprise me that he has picked up this sudden practice of talking about me in the third person.

“Where are you now, anyway?” Clay asks. “Don’t tell me! Chicago.”

“Brooklyn.”

“That’s right, that’s right!” Clay slaps himself for his forgetfulness. He pulls Kyle into a hug, angling his face up and away, and quickly releases him. “I love keeping up with you online. You are killing it.”

“Killing it,” Kyle says when we have rounded a corner. “Did you notice he didn’t say my name once? Why do I always get the feeling with him that he doesn’t actually know who I am or what I do?”

If I didn’t know Kyle so well, I might not know exactly what he did either. He posts rarely about his art history program and never about his myriad side jobs—dog walker, legal aide, stock boy at Trader Joe’s. In his posts he is always shirtless and glitter-encrusted at some warehouse party, being kissed on the cheek by a drag queen, posing before a tree in bloom in Central Park. “I’m tired of the line that picking and choosing which parts of yourself to post is dishonest,” reads one of his recent captions. “It’s called curation, people: look it up.”

The nudes before us no longer resemble William. Kyle points to one, a skinny boy standing contrapposto with his palms open to reveal the stigmata.

“Is this you?”

“No. He hasn’t asked me to model. This is me, though.”

Etched into the sky behind the boy’s torso, in a slightly darker shade of blue, is one of my shorter poems. Clay asked to use it after hearing me read it at an open mic earlier this year. Kyle leans forward. I expect him to nod quickly and pull away—for someone studying art, he has an abysmal attention span in galleries—but he stands hunched before the canvas for some time.

“The cursive is sloppy, I don’t think it’s really meant to be read—”

“Hush! You’re upsetting my rhythm.” He finishes, his lips occasionally moving to shape a phrase. Then he straightens and beams at me.

“Beautiful, darling. Pearls before swine. It just makes me wish—”

I can see it coming, tearing away the veil of our pleasant visit like a tablecloth with all the dishes still on it. “Please don’t.”

“—you’d think about applying somewhere. You’re too good to be scribbled in the background.”

An unaccountable sense of guilt flushes through me, then a defensive anger. “Why don’t you buy the painting if you’re so concerned? I get thirty percent if it sells.”

“Babe, I’m serious. What Clay said just now: it’s true. You *are* cut out for bigger things. What good is it doing you to stick around here?”

“I’m not *sticking around* indefinitely. And it’s not entirely by choice, you know. We don’t all come from old Confederate money.”

He takes an infuriatingly gentle tone. “Didn’t your mom leave you something?”

“A couple thousand in mutual funds. That’s not the same thing. When it’s gone, it’s gone.”

“Maybe enough to get you settled somewhere. Listen, I have to hustle too. It’s exhausting, but trust me, it’s worth every humiliating—”

“No one makes it in New York *just* by hustling.”

I look around the gallery, suddenly conscious that someone may have heard our escalating tone. The place feels even smaller, our voices rendered louder and more ridiculous by scale—a soap opera staged in a dollhouse.

*

We relocate to a bar across the square. A band of stringy-haired townies who graduated before our freshman year stand onstage fuzzing out lo-fi jams. People hold their places at the bar or stagger out loose-limbed onto the floor, unsure how to properly move to the music. We take a table in the back. After a long silence, loosened by a gin and tonic, I start to tell him about David: how I found out he was cheating on me and broke things off. Kyle’s face melts into a sympathetic mask, but his eyes sharpen, as if finally seeing me in focus.

“Oh sweetheart,” he says. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe you’d ask.”

He looks as if he's grabbing at the edge of something that is escaping him. "I mean, I did notice you weren't mentioning the guy, and then Clay said something, but then I thought maybe it was a sore subject."

"It's fine. Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like I'm one of those Sarah McLachlan pound puppies who just popped up on TV to ruin your show."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." He pauses, trying to remember something. "This guy was older, right?"

"Is, he's not dead. Nine or ten years older, depending on the month."

"And he sells cars?"

"He works at a dealership, but he's not a salesman." These small clarifications ache, perhaps because I have to shout them through the feedback-scuzzy air.

"So who's the other woman?"

"Some personal trainer."

"You know him?"

"Peripherally. The way I seem to know everyone."

Kyle glances over each shoulder. "No wonder you were so edgy in the gallery. You probably worry about seeing him everywhere, don't you? Seeing them together?"

I shrug. “It’s happened a few times.”

“My god,” he says. “I forgot just how bleak it is down here. Eight and a half faggots who’ve all fucked each other, but they’re so brainwashed by self-loathing they can’t admit that what they really want is to be sluts, so they play house like straights until one of them inevitably starts fucking one of the other six and a half faggots, so they split up and do it all over again. It’s neurotic.”

Anger flickers at me from far away, but I’m still reeling from the sound of the word *faggot* in my friend’s mouth.

“Are you saying I’m not gay enough because I’m hurt by infidelity?”

“Oh sweetheart,” he says again. “I am so sorry. I wasn’t talking about you.”

Suddenly I find my mouth moving freely. “It was nice, for a while. I never quite moved in with him, but I stayed over all the time. Saturdays we’d buy tomatoes at the farmers’ market, then go jogging on the trails in our skimpy little shorts. Sundays we’d sleep naked all morning and not eat breakfast until two. I helped him plant a flowerbed—or at least he humored me into thinking I was helping. We drove out to Nashville and New Orleans, fucked each other senseless in motels. He got me to care about stupid, queeny shit like curtains and wallpaper and lampshades. Bette Davis...”

“Was he out?”

“Not in so many words, but everyone knew. How could they not? We did everything together. I’d come over after work and we’d fuck in a hurry, then meet friends for dinner, all flushed and glassy-eyed and grinning like idiots. We’d walk around the square at night, not

touching but being seen together, being held together in the eyes of people we knew. It felt good to be held like that, held by this place. It felt, I don't know, like a life. Maybe not forever, but..." This is all so syrupy, I have to focus on the bitter tang of quinine on my tongue to keep equilibrium.

"It sounds lovely, babe," Kyle says softly.

"Yeah, well. I guess you're right. It's not sustainable."

We sip our drinks in silence. Kyle seems to be weighing his next emotional approach. He chooses anger. "Fuck that guy," he says. "I'm sure he's just insecure. He knows he didn't deserve you, that someone like you would never have given someone like him the time of day anywhere else, so he tried to steal back a little confidence, that's all."

I feel a rockslide beneath my sternum. "I would have wanted him anywhere."

He can't find anything to say to this, so we get up to dance. The floor is thicker with bodies now; the band has drifted into a shoegaze dirge that sounds like one throbbing note held forever. We clown against one another, flopping our arms and heads like the stoned dorm rats we once were. Kyle's hands encircle my waist and tug me to his chest. His stink, close and sustained now, overwhelms me—an animal recoil from something unripe. I catch hold of his shoulder blades and tilt my head slightly off toward the crowd. The lace of his top snags on my arm hairs. Beneath his stink's prickly aureole I pick up something tangy and vital. It doesn't turn me on, but excites me in a different way, like a guilty sniff of gasoline out a car window. I rest my head on his chest, pull breath through my nostrils. Then I feel his thumb pressing my chin up toward his face. He clamps our mouths together, his mustache damp against my upper lip. Instinctively my eyes open wider and skim the periphery. No one is looking. Kyle's mouth pries mine open; his

tongue pushes forward. Despite the tug in my gut this feels less like romance than like some complicated regional handshake, designed to expose the illiteracy of my lips, tongue, jaw, something people do somewhere else.

Notes

“All We Ever Talk About” is an homage to Raymond Carver’s story “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.”

“The Birthday Boy” is published in *Evergreen Review*.

“Sandra” is published in *Southern Humanities Review*.